

The grand illusionist



Altynai Asylmuratova has taken her rightful place at the heart and head of the Kirov Ballet. Interview by Ismene Brown. Photographs by Hugo Glendinning

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TEXT AS SENT

OUT in the golden afternoon light by the Serpentine the Swan Queen has been greeting the swans, one of whom pecked her hand. This worries me more than it worries the Swan Queen, because it seems to me that swans ought to recognise one of their own. Whereas the Swan Queen is a great deal more sensible than I am, and knows that an illusion is not to be confused with reality.

But illusion is all we ordinary mortals can see when confronted by Altynai Asylmuratova, the Kirov ballerina who, by general consensus, is the loveliest ballerina in the world. When she dances Odette in 'Swan Lake', she makes earthly value-systems vanish - her artistry and belief sweep us into a world of total illusion, where nothing is real except our desire for this swan woman to be freed from the owl-wizard's spell, for this prince to stick by his oath of love. And when she returns in her evil alter-ego, as the "Black swan" Odile, tempting the prince to break his vow to Odette, where every other dancer goes for the cold, vamp line (so hard to believe in), Asylmuratova seduces by her smiling allure, a gentle poison so sweet that, like Siegfried, you want to drink it too.

It's odd to think that after her very first performance of 'Swan Lake', when she was 20, her husband - who was also her partner - told her straight: "No, you know, 'Swan Lake' isn't for you." But then Asylmuratova has spent her career proving how wrong people can be.

She perched quietly on a vast sofa in the Royal Garden Hotel in Kensington, dark and reedlike in black jersey and trousers, her fine ebony hair running amok from the chignon. She poured tea, lit occasional cigarettes and asked me about the famous AMP 'Swan Lake' with the male swans. She was taken by its oddity, but was it spiritual? Did it serve Tchaikovsky's music? she wanted to know. She is completely without airs. It could just as easily have been the dingy Marseilles residence where we met last December, when she had been highly outspoken about the Kirov Ballet and its wayward artistic direction. Had she suffered for it, I asked? She shrugged. "Aahh... not too much. It was not news. It wasn't anything that hadn't been openly said before."

The caprice with which Asylmuratova has been treated on recent Kirov tours - frequently downgraded below current younger favourites - is no doubt partly due to her candour as well as to the chaos of running such a huge company on disastrously declining finances. But her supremacy is recognised by St Petersburg dance-goers, and she is deeply loyal to her own country.

"I could never leave. I don't find it strange that others have - everyone must do what they must. But if I like something, I don't want to change it. I married my husband and haven't changed him; I found a career and haven't changed it. Russia is my home." Her voice, light and velvety, seemed to stroke the word. "It may not be the most beautiful of homes, but it is mine. Neither I nor my husband can tear ourselves away."

FORTY years ago the Bolshoi Ballet burst into the West, exemplified in its glorious ballerina, Galina Ulanova. History couples the Bolshoi with Ulanova. History will couple the Kirov with Asylmuratova. Not until her has the almost mythical St Petersburg company, which nurtured classical ballet as we know it, had at its heart and head an artist to do its tradition justice. Until recently, the ghastliness of Soviet reality chased the Kirov's greatest artists away, Nureyev, Makarova, Baryshnikov... Like her forebears, Asylmuratova takes her lustre around the world, guesting at the Royal Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the Roland Petit Ballet. But to see her at the heart of the Kirov's matchless corps de ballet, out of which she rose, is to see a pearl among pearls, an artist in her artistic home. She will be back with the Kirov this July, dancing, among all the other roles she has made her own, her most personal ballet, GISELLE. The ticket-

rush started in February.

"As a woman she is ravishingly beautiful with a fantastic allure on stage. She has a vulnerability tempered with a deep sense of mystique. She is everything a real ballerina should be - physicality, musicality, just everything." Derek Deane, director of English National Ballet, for whom Asylmuratova is dancing 'Swan Lake' at the Royal Albert Hall end of May, did what everyone does when asked to describe her - the initial what-can-I-saw speechlessness, followed by the unruly, inadequate gush of superlatives.

Ballet is the illusionists' art, and its greatest artists are those who comprehensively deceive us. Five arm positions, five foot positions and some leg angles define its landmarks and boundaries. Because ballet is so physically unnatural, we tend to rate mere technical perfection high - yet who wants a competent, empty dancer any more than a competent, empty pianist? When Asylmuratova places her arms in the five positions, it's not the positions you are aware of but the magical meaning with which she makes them happen.

Once the world united in putting Fonteyn at the pinnacle; today the world has two resplendent ballerinas to choose from: Sylvie Guillem and Altynai Asylmuratova. But Guillem is more controversial, more questioning, sowing discord when she displays her phenomenal technique - and 'Swan Lake', the ballet of ballets, she doesn't understand. Asylmuratova seems to bless everything in her path. Like Orpheus mesmerising Cerberus, she soothes even the most finicky into slavering adoration, her skill so fine that you don't see how it works.

The Russian wouldn't mind having Guillem's body... "Just for a day or two, to have that feeling to be able to do with my legs what my arms can do, that whole body..." she told me, wriggling pleasurably. Do you think your legs aren't good enough? I asked, astonished (this woman spins faster than a Black & Decker drill). "Ohhhh, I could have more. It's not so bad to have a bit more!" But she added that "Sylvie has *personality*. I like her, I respect her. Maybe some people like her, some people don't, but she is who she is. She has a *face*. It's very important for art."

Unlike the guarded, carefully presented Guillem, Asylmuratova in person has the unconscious carelessness that must come with being born beautiful. At 36, she has a contradictory figure, almost boyish with no hips yet with a serpentine sway as she walks, and slanting black eyes from her Kazakh father. I have seen these attributes in fashion magazine spreads, clothed in thousands of dollars-worth of dresses, a face and swan-neck like Nefertiti, an aura more untouchable than any earthly queen. Those who have watched Asylmuratova dance will swear blind that she is a tiny slip of 5'2"; another example of her conjuring powers. For the record, she is a respectable 1m 69, or 5' 6", only a couple of inches shorter than Guillem.

She is melancholy - it is unusual for her to be without her husband, the superb Kirov danseur noble, Konstantin Zaklinsky, and daughter, Anastasia, four in July. She takes the family everywhere, within reason, that she tours to - she needs to. After a show, she comes back to the hotel "and I can just touch her, and it's OK. I see she's OK, and I'm OK." The arrangement works because Zaklinsky, at 42, is ending his career, and, unlike his wife, loves cooking.

Asylmuratova's marriage to Zaklinsky pairs the Kirov's two most noble dancers in an artistic partnership that, had its heyday coincided with post-1986 perestroika, would have been famous well beyond the world of cognoscenti. She feels strongly the unfairness of it. "When Konstantin was at his best, our country was closed. I am lucky, but Konstantin lost many years."

They met in her first year at the Kirov Ballet. She was a teenager with prizes from the Kirov school, the Vaganova Academy; he was already a top leading man, tall, blond and brash. "All the girls liked him, but he didn't appeal to me. He and the ballerina Galina Mezentseva came to our class to talk about their tour to Florence. Mezentseva was going on about Michelangelo and all the right things, and Kostya was going on about spaghetti.

"He's very bold and outspoken, which I didn't like at first, but when we got to know each other, I liked the fact that he didn't put on airs, was his own person. And he was also very vulnerable, like a child, which I found touching." Having seen them together in France, I myself was touched by the way her husband constantly chipped in to support her, with funny little asides, getting on with supper, keeping little Anastasia quiet and occupied while her mother talked. On stage, this supportive quality is very evident - he is a wonderful partner, big, secure, and gracefully courteous.

"Ha! You'd never recognise him off stage," said Asylmuratova deadpan, and gave me an example. "My grandfather was coming to see us on a train, and there was an old lady in the carriage, who was mad about ballet and thrilled when he said he'd introduce her to Zaklinsky. But when we turned up at the station, Kostya was all scruffy with his trousers rolled up, and she was horrified, covered her eyes, and said, 'It CAN'T be him, it CAN'T.' Her illusions were wrecked. In the studio we fight and swear all the time. Something small will go wrong, I'll blow a fuse, and he'll yell, 'You're very heavy today!'"

THEIR marriage continues what has become a family tradition. Altynai's parents and grandparents were all ballet dancers. To be a dancer, she says, was "genetic" more than anything.

But it was her grandfather who made her great, a remarkable man, Nikolai Ivanovich Siderov. He took ballet passion to rare lengths. At 13, he was ballet-mad, and ran away from his comfortable home in Leningrad to Moscow, desperate to join a ballet school. It was just after the Revolution, and he roughed it for a month, sleeping at the station, washing his shirt every night, doorstepping the Bolshoi school. But he had no documentation or support. A school caretaker took pity on him, passed him off as his nephew, and thus he achieved entrance. He became a famous operetta dancer, married another dancer, and eventually - in a triumph of natural justice - became a choreographer at the Vaganova Academy in Leningrad, from which he had run away all those years before.

He talked about ballet, says his granddaughter, morning, noon and night. "He shaped my taste, explained why sections of one ballet were better than another, and he compared ballerinas in different roles: which ones had good legs, whose technique he admired; which ones were maybe not technically brilliant, but moving."

Everyone talked ballet in this bizarre household. Asylmuratova's mother - who looked "like Sophia Loren" - was a dancer who married first a Kazakh sailor, then Asylmuratova's father, yet another dancer, and a poetic and civilised man,

from whom surely Asylmuratova has inherited her brooding sensitivity. By now the whole family were in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan.

"I was lucky, so lucky, with my parents. My father wrote poetry, about nature, moods, feelings, and talked about all the classical arts with me. He read me classical myths at bedtime, took me to see pictures at the Hermitage. My mother was very strong, my ideal. She always knew what to do, decisive, quick, never got thrown by situations, always calm. And humorous - she enjoyed jokes and told them well. So I think though she felt dance in her soul too, she wanted a child who was well educated, led a normal life. She found ballet people very limited. I once came back from dance class, and my grandfather began to ask me detailed questions, and my mother said, 'Please can we not talk about ballet for once? I'm sick of it.' And he said, 'How is it possible for a dancer to be tired of ballet? You might as well jump out of the window.'"

Her mother was pleased when Altynai (the only child of her second marriage - there is an older half-sister) showed promise as a pianist. But with the grandfather firing the little girl's imagination, not even a depressing assessment of her by the Alma-Ata dance school would put her off taking the audition for the Vaganova School in Leningrad, 7,000 kilometres the other side of the country.

She got in, and ever after there seems to have been a loving exchange of fire between daughter and mother: the daughter's golden achievements received unemotionally to her face by her mother, but behind the scenes with maternal rapture. As Asylmuratova says, she was very lucky. The family strands combined that would create a supreme artist: self-criticism, passion and poetry, a love of ballet's tradition and the urge to give herself in performance. The last seven years have been heavy for the ballerina - one by one, those four people who loved and nurtured her have died.

The future she sees nervously, on her child's behalf. Russia today, she says, is like a great machine where they kicked out the driver but no one else knows how to drive it. The public is hard-nosed now, desperate for dollars - fewer of them would spend their food money on flowers for their favourite ballerina. Dancers earn £50 a week, without the privileges of old, and that reverence her grandfather felt for art is less common today.

What, I ask, if little Anastasia wants to be a dancer? Altynai Asylmuratova looks at her dimpled little daughter and says slowly, "I don't know..." The child hums Tchaikovsky. You can hear the beginning of a beautiful new mother-daughter argument.

English National Ballet 'Swan Lake', Royal Albert Hall, May 29-June 11. Kirov Ballet, Coliseum July 8-August 9