

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Two ballerinas, one Russian and one British, talk to **Ismene Brown** about their health, exercise and diet concerns

# Tea and cake – or tvorog and fruit

**F**OR ballet dancers, getting a diet right must sometimes seem impossible. One moment, their world is fraught with hysterical tales of anorexic misery, the next, the press sneers about over-indulgence and unattractive pear shapes.

A recent book by Julia Buckroyd, a British dance psychotherapist, caused controversy with its claims of widespread eating disorders and over-strict regimes, and yet Derek Deane, the artistic director of English National Ballet, has declared publicly that he finds foreign dancers more lithe and better-shaped than English ones. No wonder many pubertal girls in dance schools become obsessed by their size.

So how can ballerinas stay slim and strong? In the early Nineties, a "Healthier Dancer" project, masterminded by the lobby group Dance UK (which represents all dancers, from ballet to modern and musical theatre), came up with guidelines emphasising the importance of grain and pulse intake, and fruit and vegetables — as well as some meat, fish, eggs or dairy produce for protein. But this diet required dancers to be competent cooks, which many of them are not.

The nutrition information sheet from Dance UK points out that the average British diet, high in fat, sugar and protein, is the opposite of what is recommended. "Some dancers are so upset by the whole business of food that they have got into the habit of using laxatives... or making themselves sick as a means of weight control," says the report's author, the same Julia Buckroyd.

But what about those slender foreign dancers? The British physique is generally sturdier than the wiry, athletic American line, or the almost weightless look associated with Russian ballet. Do Kirov ballerinas have similar problems — or are things even worse for them?

The Daily Telegraph asked two ballerinas, one from each tradition, to compare notes. Some surprising differences emerged — not least of which is that the super-slim Kirov girl

practises almost the opposite regime to that suggested by Dance UK.

### JANE BURN of the ROYAL BALLET

Jane Burn, 27, from near Winchester, Hants, was recently promoted to first soloist, the rank below principal. At 5ft 3in tall, she weighs "probably about seven and a half stone", the yardstick weight at the Kirov for a ballerina three inches taller.

She says British ballerinas are acutely conscious of the Kirov physique. "Very long, very slender," she explains, "but I think everybody at the Royal Ballet has a beautiful physique, though we are much more varied."

"We'd all like to have a better body but bone structure and length of leg is something diet can't change, though Pilates exercises are an incredibly good way of training muscle shape."

### Typical day

Burn always starts with a 1hr 15min daily class, consisting of classic ballet stretches at the barre, arm, leg and foot exercises, and finally jumps, turns and speed work. "We are contracted for four classes a week, but most of us do six — and you may have two to four hours of rehearsal. But you're probably only flat-out in rehearsal for about 15 minutes because, for much of the time, you are waiting for your turn or working slowly on interpretative matters. It's anaerobic, and if you haven't much work on, it's important to do some other kind of activity, like swimming or running."

### Typical diet

Burn has breakfast at 8.30 am, which always consists of tea, toast and butter and a banana. "Bananas are high in potassium, which controls muscle cramps. Nearly everyone here has a banana a day, even two," she explains. "We get 15-minute breaks quite often and I'll have the banana, for tea and about six sugars to keep going, while others go on to the balcony for a fag. I've never smoked, but many people do, though a couple of years ago, a section of the



Perfect poise: Jane Burn, left, and Sofia Gumerova have similar routines, beginning with a 75-minute class

company gave up en masse." Dancers must fit in lunch whenever they can.

"Sometimes, you have to take your break at 12, sometimes it's two or three before there's a proper gap. We take muesli bars or sandwiches into the studios while we rehearse. "After a show, we often go out to a restaurant together — I spend quite a lot of money on eating out. Cooking is less appealing now to me than it was. I like Mediterranean-style food, with wine, red meat,

and olive oil, but we have to be sensible and adaptable. When we tour, we eat anything: in China,

my best meal turned out to be things like sheep's tail and stomach."

Burn does not believe in denying herself excessively: "There's no point in saying 'I am not going to eat chocolate ever'. I eat a little bit quite often. In the holidays, everybody eats what they want, and in autumn, when we come back, the girls are always wearing three layers, to disguise themselves."

### Health concerns

"We are driving our bodies quite close to their limits at times, and you have to learn to look after yourself: get

food, rest, sleep. You've got to be healthy to do this. You can't survive if you are obsessive or anorexic. And I don't think the audience likes to see very thin people, anyway."

Burn admits that some of the younger girls have a problem with amenorrhoea (the absence of periods, often caused by a combination of poor diet and excessive exercise). "When I was at school they were a bit patchy for me. We can get bone density checks here: a lot of dancers take calcium supplements, though if you eat a sensible diet you don't need them."

Dancers are expected to be more athletic than ever, says Burn. "People are starting to try to find ways to copy sportsmen and women. Food has definitely been a big issue in dance."

### SOFIA GUMEROVA of the KIROV BALLET

Sofia Gumerova is 22 years old and 5ft 7in tall. A Kirov soloist, she has been dancing the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake* in London. What does she weigh? "It's a big secret," she says, firmly. "We do not talk about such delicate matters. There used to be a view in the company that a boy could lift a girl

without strain if she weighed 47 kilos (7-4 stone). So no girl will confess to being more than that. At the Vaganova Academy [the Kirov's great feeder school], you were told that the difference between your height and weight should be 122. So if you are 170 centimetres (5ft 6in), take off 122 and you should weigh 48 kilos (7-6 stone). But people vary. I think 49 kilos (7-7 stone) is ideal for me."

Most people would consider this very thin indeed, and yet Gumerova looks glowingly healthy. Thinness is a relatively recent trend in Russian ballerinas, influenced by their new interest in American ballet and the worldwide impact of the slender French star Sylvie Guillem.

Gumerova also points out that Russian girls are selected for their delicate bone structure, too — and declines to comment on the typical British ballerina.

### Typical day

For six days a week, Gumerova starts with a class of about 1hr 15mins, similar to Jane Burn's. "Then probably two rehearsals of about 90 minutes each. I sometimes go jogging, as well. Here, in London, I like running in St James's Park near Buckingham Palace — it has a very pretty lake."

### Typical diet

"I do put on weight if I haven't got a lot of rehearsing. That's when I diet. If I must lose weight very quickly, I might have a day eating a kilo of one kind of fresh fruit and nothing else. A very good rule — for ordinary people, as well — is not to eat after 6pm. "For breakfast, I have tvorog, which you don't have in England — it's a cross between yogurt and white cheese. I have sugar on it, and tea. Some people have nuts or raisins with it. "At 2pm, I go home for my main meal, which my mother cooks for the family — a meat casserole with cooked vegetables, and tea. Later, if I need an exercise break before a performance, I might have a bar of chocolate. It picks up my spirits. I have also noticed that if people are troubled or nervous here [in the UK],

they have a piece of cake to help them calm down.

After a performance, I usually don't eat unless I feel very hungry, in which case I like fruit and raw vegetables. You in the West seem to think that we have shortages of food in Russia, but it's not so. We have everything in the shops, if you have money."

### Health concerns

Gumerova chooses not to have medical check-ups: "It's better not to know. It's rare that in a ballerina's body everything will be OK. If you start looking for one problem, you will never stop finding them. "A ballerina who cares about her health will add calcium and vitamins to her diet, to help avoid menstrual disruption and bone and teeth trouble. You sweat a lot of calcium away. Dairy products, such as tvorog and yogurt contain a lot, which is partly why I eat them."

"I have heard that pasta, potatoes and starchy foods are supposed to be good, but I don't eat them. I can't cook, and nobody tells you right or wrong, so you reach your own diet through trial and error."

"I'm hoping to get more sophisticated knowledge from a book I'm now reading about the diets of sportsmen and women. There is perhaps a place for an adviser on diet in the academy, someone to help with young girls."

"Girls in Russia have a very special attitude to the ballet; they are very serious and quite fanatical about their art. We learn discipline about food very young."

"If a girl is putting on too much weight, it could be genetic, in which case they will take her out as early as possible so that she can get a good education elsewhere. "I don't drink alcohol at all, or smoke. When I danced in *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*, and had to smoke on stage, half of the company were trying to show me how to do it."

□ The Kirov Ballet is at the Royal Opera House until August 21 (tickets: 020 7374 4000). Dance UK's Healthier Dancer Conference 2000 is on October 14 and 15 at the Lindbury Studio, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7228 4994).

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