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Sylvie's wake-up call

Sylvie Guillem is 37 now, with a host of young dancers rising to challenge her. But the queen of the Royal Ballet is as passionately committed to excellence as ever. She talks to Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

30 March 2002 • 12:01am

'SHE'S fighting the world most of the time - and she's fighting against herself too. An extreme character, like a wild animal - someone who is not understood, someone who is loved and hated at the same time, who has her own rules of life. A revoltee."

The French ballerina Sylvie Guillem is describing her next role at the Royal Ballet, that of the cigar-smoking Carmen in Mats Ek's modern dance version of the Bizet opera.

Might she be describing herself, too? "Ha! I was expecting that!" she says with a laugh, as she sits in her dressing room picking at a plaster on her heel, still red from rehearsal. For 13 years the tall, wiry Parisienne has been both queen and outcast at the Covent Garden company. She has the biggest fees, the biggest dressing room, and unique choice over her roles. She has a freedom to perform anywhere that is unheard of at the ensemble-minded Royal Ballet. She sometimes refuses the costume prescribed for her, or dances with bare legs. "If I do not feel comfortable, I will not look comfortable," she says.

Such power isolates her; so does her high intelligence. But there is a wilfulness there, too, which can exasperate those who would like to love her artistry. So she remains a phenomenon people are wary about, rather than one people learn from.

Take two recent events. A year ago she was awarded the first Nijinsky Prize for the world's best ballerina in Monte Carlo. She made her speech into a disdainful attack on the "supermarket culture" of such awards. Her serious point was buried in the fury at her ingratitude before the Monegasque royal family.

There was also her shocking photo-shoot in French Vogue. It is not unusual to see ballerinas in fashion magazines. They make elfin, maidenly clothes-horses, their modesty in front of the camera radiating a more delicate, timeless sort of femininity. When Guillem did Vogue, she wanted to do something "free and 'appy. Natural, simple, joyful. It was the real me, non?" So she photographed herself in the nude, with not a scrap of make-up on. She was accessorised only by her undressed hair and a bashed camera.

Outrage ricocheted around the world. "I think it was the picture with the two legs apart and the camera in the middle mostly," she says, deadpan. Just as shocking, I would guess, was seeing in a fashion magazine a 35-year-old woman's body not as a vehicle of

illusory prettiness, but one of sheer hard work and much experience. Long, taut legs, yes, but facial lines, elbow wrinkles, protuberant muscles and veins, and feet as craggy as the Rockies. It wasn't so much the monstrous camera that unnerved the hyper-sensitive French, maybe, as the lack of Touche Eclat under Guillem's eyes.

There isn't any Touche Eclat on her views either. Christened "Mademoiselle Non" when she escaped from Rudolf Nureyev's Paris Opera Ballet to the Royal Ballet, she attracted overwhelming, often hostile attention for her exotically gymnastic body and rather snotty independence. Her extravagant "six o'clock" leg lifts kept her apart from the main Royal Ballet stream, but so did her special contracts with the company's director, Sir Anthony Dowell, who spied something more than just a miraculous physical specimen. To general amazement, he cast her relentlessly against type, as dramatic, vulnerable women, and she flowered gratefully.

When Dowell retired last summer, Guillem surprised many by leading the tributes to him, eloquently describing her "fear" for ballet without him and his like to lead it. For all her reputation as a one-off, her views are deeply traditional - almost too serious for the British.

"Dancers should realise that they are really lucky," she says excitably. "Dancing is not a job. It's people who are chosen. And you must realise that you are chosen. Sometimes I see a performance that makes me really angry - I think, those people are lucky and they don't realise it. There are so many who are not so lucky, and they wish they could be here, even if it were only for five minutes of their life. But these dancers are blase. And I want to say, come on, wake up, whatever you do, please do it well and do it with all that you have."

This outburst will bring balm to the souls of all those who feel a lurking fear that ballet is changing from an art into a cultural product at Covent Garden. Guillem feels it, too, "but not just here, everywhere. Things are now becoming very commercial, empty. As long as you have good promotion, you can sell anything. And I think at the time of Anthony Dowell and Rudolf Nureyev, those passionate people were making more news, with their talent, their love and need to be there on stage. It was genuine."

She is infuriated that the Royal Opera House sells tickets for the public to watch rehearsals. "I can't stand it," she protests, dragging at her messy auburn plait. "I can sell something, yes, I sell myself at the time of the show, which is what I work for. But the time I need for working before is mine - I don't want to sell that." She quotes Jean-Luc Godard's answer, when asked why he made films: "Supprimer le pourquoi." To make asking why unnecessary.

Although there are new names rising to the top at the Royal Ballet, Guillem's performances remain transcendentally able to supprimer le pourquoi. Her rendition of MacMillan's courtesan Manon has a natural force that makes an uneven, over-literal ballet convey something irresistible about woman's power over man. Three years ago, her revival of Ashton's Marguerite and Armand, created for Fonteyn and Nureyev, aroused considerable public opposition, but she triumphantly repaid the risk. (Ashton's heir, Anthony Russell-Roberts, says that, despite many requests, he will not currently

consider any other interpreter.)

But Guillem will no longer battle with ballets in which she does not believe. Of work by the neoclassical genius George Balanchine, she says: "I like to see it, but I don't like to dance it. Musically it is fantastic, but afterwards you feel you have danced into a box." She also turned down the offer at Covent Garden this spring of the splendidly exotic 19th-century classic La Bayadere.

"I thought, I will see only all the things that are wrong with it, that will stop me having any pleasure, because I can't believe in it any more. The best part of it is the Shades act,

and the rest of it is naff. Non?"

Non, I say. The aesthetic style, the magical impression of La Bayadere counts, surely, more than its third-rate story. "For an audience maybe, yes, but as an interpreter - physically it's hard, this kind of ballet, and if you can't be mentally supported by intelligence, by emotional logic, by musicality, it's not worth it. I mean, it's not that I don't want to be tired - Mats Ek's Carmen is a killer, it's 45 minutes, and you finish dead. It's just that you don't have the courage any more to get tired for nothing."

Guillem turned 37 last month, and I wonder if she is discomfited by the chatter about younger ballerinas such as Alina Cojocaru and Tamara Rojo. "No, I feel comfortable with the way it is," she says mildly. But, in the current climate of injuries at the Royal Ballet, she advises them to say "non" more often to roles. "If you take everything, it's like doing four jobs at the same time, and none of them properly. You pay for it one day."

Rarely injured herself, she refused to do Giselle and Carmen at the same time (which Rojo is doing). "They don't go together. I don't want to aggress my body so much. Going from one style to another would be a nightmare, and neither would be done very well."

She is now increasingly known for cherrypicking dramatic "English" roles, Ashton and MacMillan heroines, rather than technical showpieces. "I did enjoy for a while the physical things. But after you've been around all that, proved what you can do, you feel dry emotionally."

She longed to perform Cranko's tragic Onegin at Covent Garden this season, but the owners of the Cranko rights did not even see her. "Well, yes, it did surprise me. I don't know the guys. Maybe they have something against me that I don't know about But then I saw that they didn't want Jonathan Cope, the senior man at Covent Garden, for the part of Onegin either, so I started to laugh. Frankly, these are people I don't want to meet."

Ten years ago, it looked as if Guillem might change the face of choreography, as well as of ballet classes, with her extraordinary physical gifts. But the innovative roles, apart from the odd William Forsythe or Maurice Bejart, have not come forth, and there is no film of her in her finest roles. Fluttering her hands dismissively, Guillem says: "In the theatre we do something that maybe should pass. We go on stage, tell the story, and we go. It stays with you, or it doesn't stay. That's it."

- 'Carmen' is on the 'Cross Cultures' mixed bill, April 10-24. Tickets: 020 7304 4000