



Swanderful...

At the age of 21, the Royal Ballet's Alina Cojocaru is already being called a once-in-a-lifetime ballerina. As she prepares to dance Swan Lake, she talks to Ismene Brown

By Ismene Brown

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This summer, for the first time in her life, at the age of 21, Alina Cojocaru lay on a beach, had an ice cream and soaked up some rays. It was a weird and wonderful experience for her; in previous summers, she had only chased work, tirelessly filling in the gap between the end of one season and the start of the next with freelance engagements. The life of a ballerina. The life of a once-in-a-lifetime ballerina, whom some already speak of as a genius.

Deborah Bull's recent television series, *A Dancer's Body*, took us into the science of how those frail-looking girls manage not merely to stand up on their matchstick legs but do extraordinarily powerful things with them. However, what she did not touch on was the vastly more interesting enigma of the artist's mind. Ballet dancers go through so much on behalf of the rest of us - theirs is an art obsessed with quirky stories of love, betrayal and death, their prime duty to suffer or exult in extreme emotional states to give catharsis to the ordinary public that's had a dull day in the office. Ordinary dancers never chase away disbelief; great artists are the ones who persuade us that they are

what they say they are - swans, eternal lovers, suicidal prostitutes.

No wonder the great ballerinas tend to peak in their mid-thirties. What is strange is when a dancer has those instincts very young. Cojocaru is a scrap of a thing, 5ft 2in, with a small, innocent face and a flat-chested body swamped by size 6 jeans. This 21-year-old's meteoric rise to the top ranks of the Royal Ballet does not surprise one of the great ballerinas of history, Natalia Makarova. "Alina has an exceptional talent, highly intelligent," she says. "Within that beautiful, fragile frame she is a very strong person. She seems to know what I am about to tell her even before I speak - it's rare in such a young person."

Makarova may not be surprised, but it shocks the audience to find that this apparent child performs like a woman of immense experience. It has been faintly indecent to watch her in Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling in the past fortnight*, playing a rampaging 17-year-old who makes a suicide pact with Crown Prince Rudolf, and dances some of the most lubricious-looking pas de deux ever created.

"I know! It was my big challenge. But of course I knew I could do it," said Cojocaru when we met at the Opera House last week. She had just had that night's performance cancelled, due to injury to her partner, Johan Kobborg. "What can I do? That's theatre life," she said lightly, in a tiny, soft voice.

How can she believe in a character as bad as Mary Vetsera, this empty-hearted schemer who will do anything for celebrity - even kill herself? "Well, I think she is obsessed with sex and she is obsessed with him," replies Cojocaru. She says Lynn Seymour, the great ballerina who originated the part in 1978, kept shouting, "Don't love him" as she rehearsed it

"I guess I was dancing it too romantic at first," she says. "It's not a pretty part - let's say, it's not making love, it's having sex. But somehow for me by the last pas de deux it changes - because actually Mary wrote to her mum, 'I would rather die than live without love.' So she did love him by the end."

Romanticism, she confesses, is her natural state of mind. Every night after her show she goes home alone to her central London flat and switches on Heart FM on the radio: "They play slow things, and people phone in and at 11.30 every night they have 'true love stories', and it always touches me."

She loves going to the cinema and always wears trainers on her little ballerina feet, but in other ways appears different from the usual 21-year-old. Are you any good at boogieing, I ask. She looks nonplussed. Do you know what it is? "No, I don't." She laughs, uncertainly.

The fact is that Cojocaru didn't reach where she is today by going to nightclubs. Her life has been regimented from early childhood - baby Eastern bloc gym classes, off on a 27-hour train journey at nine to study ballet in Kiev, becoming a principal dancer in Kiev at 17. She had to join the Royal Ballet at corps level, but leapfrogged to principal level within two years. She has conquered the public as tragic Juliet, tragic Giselle, tragic Tatiana, and next week tackles the ballerina's Everest role, Odette-Odile in Swan Lake.

It's a tall order, isn't it, I say, for a young chit to be required to know truths about all these torrid emotional states. How does she look so convincing? "In my life, it always happened that things came first on stage than in life. And things happen on stage that don't happen in life! You don't kill yourself every day, you don't fall in love every day. Because I put so much into it, it does feel as if I lead my life on stage. But I think it makes you feel richer inside yourself. On the other hand, I think this life does make us a bit different - I'm not sure if someone outside would think us a bit crazy."

It may be also that being East European makes Cojocaru that bit different from other ballerinas too. Her upbringing selected her for toughness and dedication, and groomed her in self-reliance. Last year, the then Royal Ballet director Ross Stretton put her down for a record-breaking 50 performances during the year; it was said that she was dancing with a bad injury, under pressure, burning out her talent. No, she says, her only pressure was herself. "Sometimes you can get carried away. Nobody can make you do something you don't want to do."

Yet that beach holiday with her sister this summer was forced on her, she admits, by a sudden, massive need to rest. It taught her, she says, to take a new pleasure in her work on her return this season, during which she is scheduled for a more normal 30 shows.

The Royal Ballet has shown her that ballet can operate in a gentler world than the cut-throat Eastern bloc version. She says she learnt early on in her life not to trust others, and her happiest moment ever was not the April 2001 night when she was created principal by the then director Sir Anthony Dowell, but her first Romeo and Juliet the month before. "On the day of the show, almost every single person in the company had a little note or a little chocolate for me, anything for a good luck present - I've never in my life felt so much support from everybody around me. I felt at the end of that show and that day, I don't want to change anything about this."

Her partner was Kobborg, the 30-year-old Danish star who, with Cojocaru, is forging a stage pairing of phenomenal artistic sympathy and chemistry. She is reticent about analysing it - "I don't know, it just feels natural, it feels right, we are alive on stage."

Their appetite for hard work undoubtedly explains some of it, as does their physical compatibility; moreover, both have the hunger of outsiders who came into the Royal Ballet to milk its trademark dramas. They are packing in the great roles: after Mayerling and Swan Lake, they have Ashton's Scenes de Ballet and MacMillan's Manon to come this season.

Once they have swept through the Royal Ballet cupboards, though, the intensely ambitious Cojocaru may not stay. She is an itinerant, by upbringing and temperament, and her dream is to dance with the Kirov in St Petersburg. "The world seems so small. You meet new people, new teachers, you meet old friends, in every company. The place doesn't matter - when you go on stage, it's one stage."

- Alina Cojocaru dances 'Swan Lake' at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, next Tuesday, and on Nov 27, Dec 6 and Dec 12. Tickets: 020 7304 4000.



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