



## 'I haven't danced my best ballet yet'

Ismene Brown

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## **Nina Ananiashvili is one of ballet's true stars. Yet at 40 she feels she's still improving, she tells Ismene Brown**

The word "ballerina" is defined in Chambers Dictionary merely as "a female ballet dancer". Yet a true ballerina vaults way beyond such a utilitarian definition.

Alluring grace, enticing mystique, personal magic, instinctive expressiveness and the technical wizardry to draw the public with her into unvoiceable passions and dreams – these qualities separate the handful of true ballerinas from the legions of mere female ballet-dancers. Nina Ananiashvili of the Bolshoi is one of that tiny elite.

Dressed for our interview in a black trouser-suit, slender as a boy, with short, dark bobbed hair and an impish, laughing face, she hardly invokes the exotic figure she cuts on stage. She has just turned 40, but her emotional delivery and astonishing technique remain in prime condition. On Tuesday she arrives in London with her elite company drawn from the Bolshoi to perform two programmes of modern ballets.

She founded the Moscow Dance Theatre with Alexei Fadeyev, one of her great partners, after he was regrettably dismissed as the Bolshoi Ballet's artistic director in late 2000. Their purpose was to show up the stagnant, monumental flagship company by running a smaller, tighter, more creative outfit.

"The Bolshoi has a big repertoire," she says, "but we didn't have the possibility of the new work we wanted. Of course I am a classical ballerina, I adore classical ballet, but to work on something new with a choreographer, this is something else, something I missed all my life.

"With the Moscow Dance Theatre, we wanted to give opportunities to principal dancers of the Bolshoi Theatre to do this."

Two of the Bolshoi's finest leading men, Sergei Filin and Dmitri Belogolovtsev, are part of the group, and three of the ballets are by the Bolshoi's latest artistic director, Alexei Ratmansky.

"He is a very talented person, and everyone is hoping for new things from him. These three ballets are totally different from each other. The first is classical but a little bit funny, the second is influenced by Japan, because when I saw Kabuki theatre and Kodo drumming I was shocked by how beautiful and interesting it is. The third, Leah, is a story about a Jewish family. I call it my modern Giselle."

The Bolshoi's stagnancy in the last Soviet years drove some of its top artists away, including two of Ananiashvili's favourite partners – Andris Liepa to America, Irek Mukhamedov to the Royal Ballet.

She herself very nearly joined the Royal Ballet, wooed by one of her greatest admirers, the choreographer Kenneth MacMillan. He adored her, and remounted his fairytale ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* at Covent Garden for her and Fadeyev, then put them in *Romeo and Juliet* at Birmingham Royal Ballet.

"I loved him like family," says Ananiashvili, her voice rising with emotion. "We had a fantastic thing together." In 1992 she boldly went over the head of the Bolshoi's chief choreographer, Yuri Grigorovich, to get the go ahead for MacMillan to mount a ballet in

Moscow. Had MacMillan not died that October, one wonders what changes might have resulted within the hidebound Bolshoi.

She thinks it may have been her own biggest missed opportunity, but consoles herself: "I am still very lucky that I spent a little time with him, that I touched the last great person in the ballet world.

"Maybe I could have become the Royal Ballet's ballerina. Sylvie Guillem even told me – because we almost started together – 'London really likes you!', because I always had good reviews and they criticised Sylvie a lot then. She said, 'They love you because you are Russian, and they don't like me because I am French!'"

In fact, despite being mostly at loggerheads with Grigorovich, Ananiashvili could not finally bring herself to leave the Bolshoi.

"Before Irek went in 1990, the Royal Ballet proposed for me and for Alexei Fadeychev to join. I sometimes wonder if I was wrong to say no. Maybe it was that we'd just become a free people and I had just got married. Also, I loved my classes and I loved my coach, Raissa Struchkova, who I have worked with all my life, and I couldn't think how I could continue to dance without them. To be totally free, when you haven't a home, is quite painful."

Instead, Ananiashvili played cannily with perestroika, and manufactured herself a highwire double existence. Uniquely in the Bolshoi, she runs a parallel international career, primarily as American Ballet Theatre's idolised guest star in New York.

The price she pays is to be regarded inside the Bolshoi as virtually a guest artist. However, it has kept her on her toes at an age when many dancers are retiring.

She is eagerly trying for a baby with her husband, businessman Gregory Vashadze.

"Darcey Bussell has had a second child? Good girl! I like her so much. If God helps me, I really want it to happen to me."

Meanwhile, she seizes the day. "The ballerina Tatiana Terekhova told me once, 'Nina, after 35 years old you will be dancing much more easily, you will really enjoy your dancing.' And I thought, 'Ah no, it's impossible, after 35 I will be really tired.' Now I think she was right, because now I know on stage I can control everything. I am really secure. I enjoy every moment, because time has gone so quickly and I have this feeling that I haven't danced my best ballet yet. Choreographers haven't used my possibilities as I still hope. Sometimes when I see young dancers I think, 'My God, why don't they jump?' It's amazing – I'm jumping better than them!"

- Nina Ananiashvili and the Moscow Dance Theatre perform at Sadler's Wells, from Mar 2 - 6; tickets 020 7863 8000.



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