The two graces

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In Tamara Rojo and Alina Cojocaru, the Royal Ballet finds itself blessed with two superlative dancers whose styles are very different and yet wholly complementary. As they begin a new season at Covent Garden, they talk to Ismene Brown

There are moments – not often – when the theatre stage is gripped by the sight of two

competing and complementary talents in one company, two individuals so outstanding that their art form seems to burst into flame. Callas and Sutherland in opera, Olivier and Gielgud in theatre.

But it is ballet where this coincidence of complementary opposites takes on a thrilling shine, as great ballerina meets great ballerina. We had it twice in British ballet's golden age, with Margot Fonteyn and Moira Shearer, and with Lynn Seymour and Antoinette Sibley, and later, to a degree, around Sylvie Guillem and Darcey Bussell.

Now the fans are out, arguing again, defending the transcendence of either Alina

Cojocaru or Tamara Rojo – pure and sensual, the one who floats when she jumps, the other who strikes sparks when she spins, the dancer's dancer and the woman who dances.

And yet the marvellous thing is that both cross deep into each other's natural territory, as gifted actresses as they are ideal classical dancers.

Ballerinas are kaleidoscopic performers, able to change nightly from visions of purity to divine seducers to agents of nightmare and take our fantasies with them. Many dancers can dance beautiful steps correctly, but to have the ability to imagine something profound and communicate it irresistibly to 2,000 watchers is a kind of magic that in Cojocaru and Rojo seems almost effortless.

Cojocaru is partly home-grown, having finished her Russian training at the Royal Ballet School, and then, after a year as principal in Kiev, returning to Covent Garden where she shot to top rank at 19. Rojo was English National Ballet's star when she moved to WC2 – their arena productions were launched around her astonishing command of vast audiences.

Seymour has coached both in MacMillan's torrid, dramatic ballets, and Rojo in Ashton this year, and says both are "magically gifted. Fred would have adored working with them both."

"Fred" is the English choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton, whose centennial year has brought flooding back into the Royal Ballet an oeuvre somewhat neglected in the recent fashion for more physically confessional ballets.

His lifelong muses were two utterly contrasting women – the ethereal ballerina Anna Pavlova and the voluptuous modernist Isadora Duncan. His own need to be mysterious – as a homosexual man living in a time when homosexuality was illegal – fed, believes

Seymour, into the disguised sensuality and mystique of his ballerina roles, with a sophistication very different from the let-it-all-hang-out naturalism of MacMillan.

Though identified primarily with MacMillan, Seymour was muse to Ashton too, and believes Ashton is "far harder to dance than MacMillan. Realism has no place in Ashton. It's all illusion, romance. In dance terms, with Kenneth, if he didn't get instant gratification, if the person couldn't do a step right away he wouldn't use it.

"Fred would throw you into this cold plunge-pool of physical impossibility and see what came out at the other end. Nothing you do can feel safe. He demanded so much movement of the upper body and the head that it's very hard to keep on your legs. It was scary to do, you need huge courage."

Meeting Cojocaru and Rojo, I find them both longing to be scared and challenged, and admitting Ashton is a steep learning curve for them. The 30-year-old Spaniard is more socially poised than the shy 23-year-old Romanian, but both have found Covent Garden to be their expressive home.

"We are very different physically," says little Rojo of the even tinier Cojocaru. "She is a small girl. And as much dramatically as she is able to do anything, the physical

appearance is something neither of us can do anything about, and I am more vol-oop-too-us."

We both laugh at her seductive pronunciation. It seems unsurprising that Rojo loves dark roles, flamenco and Nina Simone.

But if Rojo and Cojocaru are to prove themselves true mistresses of their adopted home, true heirs of the kaleidoscopic lustre of Seymour and Sibley, they must captivate the public in Ashton's women this season, starting this weekend with A Wedding Bouquet. Both wriggle delightfully in their chairs trying to describe what's different about his choreography.

Rojo says, "He wants a precise ballerina on the bottom and a lyric ballerina on the top. Which makes it very complicated, because your body tends to attack everything together.

"I mean, if you attack an arabesque or do speedy steps with the feet, you tend to crisp the top too – and he doesn't allow you to do that, because there is lots of bending and softness up there, lots of leaving the body behind you."

And then there are his pas de deux. If MacMillan's pell-mell love duets are considered the ultimate dramatic thrill in ballet, to devotees of Ashton's cheek-to-cheek intimacy they can look blatant.

Ashton pas de deux are about love, and yet they knit two bodies together as intricately and erotically as John Donne wrote love poetry. Ashton was inspired by the instinctive Sibley-Dowell partnership, and Cojocaru, with her intimate partnership with Johan Kobborg, 32, easily takes over that mantle. Not only are these two uncannily similar in body and mind, they also have youth on their side.

Rojo is excited by her partnerships with Cubans Carlos Acosta and José-Manuel Carreño, but she prizes most the intimate chemistry she has found with 41-year-old Jonathan Cope, a crackling marriage of differences. Cope will be her Ashton partner, while Acosta squires her in two of her greatest roles, Manon and Swan Lake.

For Cojocaru, Swan Lake lurks still not properly conquered. Her London debut in this Everest of roles two years ago was oddly mannered, and she says she knew she blew it. It had gone well in her debut on the Royal Ballet's Australian tour, she sighs.

"As soon as I came back here, I didn't enjoy it. You know when you dance it but you are not there? I always felt a step behind. From then on I had a worry about Swan Lake."

But when she returns to Swan Lake with Kobborg in December, it will be "definitely very different". Her increased confidence shows in the cheering change in her from two years ago – no longer the workaholic loner, but now enjoying her friends, and shopping for her new flat.

Rojo offers an appraisal of what these two supremely imaginative, physically expressive women do.

"I want to bring an atmosphere, I want to bring a smell to the ballet, not just do the steps. For the public to forget about their job and get into this smell with me.

"If the public could know nothing about me if would be fabulous, it would allow me to be a different thing every night. Hopefully a mystery. Mysteries are always interesting."

And so would say the master of mystery, Frederick Ashton.

- The Royal Ballet season opened last night. Tickets: 020 7304 4000
- Mary McCartney Donald's exhibition 'Off Pointe' is currently on display at the Royal Opera House.

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