# A ballet born of strife and conflict

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**When acclaimed British choreographer Christopher Wheeldon worked with the Bolshoi on a new 'Hamlet' ballet, the result was a passionate clash of cultures. Ismene Brown reports**

'It was terrifying. I thought, oh no, this is the one. I knew eventually it would happen, that I'd just stop and wouldn't be able to work any more."

Christopher Wheeldon, the acclaimed young ballet choreographer, is reliving the moment when, working at the world's biggest company, the Bolshoi in Moscow, his creative life came to a halt.

After two weeks' work on a new Hamlet ballet, he went home to New York at Christmas convinced that nothing could save the shambles that was emerging.

What happened then is recorded in what promises to be a gripping television dance-thriller, as Wheeldon drew on the mysterious skills of the master choreographer to pluck triumph from the jaws of disaster.

The new ballet, Elsinore, will be danced by the Bolshoi in London next month on a remarkable triple bill, and nothing about this exquisitely focused and accomplished work, which the Bolshoi's finest dancers perform as if it grew from their souls, betrays its birth in such agony and doubt.

But it's all on film, all the tears, all the fears. The Ballet Boyz, Michael Nunn and William Trevitt, were shooting the whole thing in a fly-on-the-wall documentary for Channel 4 (due to be transmitted at Christmas).

Being both filmmakers and eminent dancers, they were in a unique position. As Trevitt says, "The fly came down off the wall"; they were filming a rehearsal where dancers couldn't understand the lift Wheeldon wanted, and Nunn simply put down his camera, grabbed a dancer, and hoisted her.

The dancers had no idea that these filmmakers were also major dancers, and the shock of discovery broke the ice for Wheeldon.

Yet what promises to be equally absorbing is a candid record of the passionate conflict that burns inside the thrilling current reinvention of the former Soviet Union's great flagship company.

I was in Moscow last spring, as the company prepared a controversial "American" bill, with the Wheeldon première alongside Twyla Tharp's iconoclastic sneakers-and-tracksuit work, In the Upper Room, which will be playing in London too. It felt as if I'd plunged into a Shakespearean war.

The old establishment, raised under the 31-year directorship of the iron Soviet chief Yuri Grigorovich, were mustering against the current artistic director Alexei Ratmansky; the brazen "American Choreographers" evening represented everything they most distrusted about renewal.

Ratmansky was pale and sweaty, rumours abounded of a dancers' coup led by the smouldering dancer Nikolai Tskiskaridze, and of a "new Grigorovich" order that would rid the Bolshoi of these Western pollutants.

In the event, Ratmansky just had flu, Tsiskaridze had pneumonia, Wheeldon's ballet (titled Misericordes there) was hailed as profoundly beautiful, and the public went crazy for the Tharp - which will be easy to understand if the Bolshoi dance it in London the phenomenal way they did in Moscow.

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Much of this gripping instability will be caught in the Ballet Boyz film. What should also emerge is how important that instability was and is to creativity.

Wheeldon arrived ignorant of how the colossal Bolshoi worked, while the dancers hadn't a clue who he was. It didn't promise well.

Having turned down a previous offer to create a new three-act Cinderella for them, he was uneasily conscious that the new ballet, only a one-acter, needed to be extra fine to be a credit not to just to himself but to a beleaguered Ratmansky.

And he felt he was being sabotaged at every turn by the Bolshoi's legendary coaches.

"I've challenged everything they know. Just to get the girls to tip their pelvises under, to create an underneath kind of arc, a very Balanchine kind of thing - I couldn't for the longest time get them to do it, because the schooling here is very square, they're used

to dancing in tutus and being right 'over their legs'."

"Dancers love to be told they look good, and they all have their coaches with them when we're working, but these coaches are ex-Bolshoi ballerinas who represent a whole different era."

And the ladies would countermand him, telling their protégés, "You don't look nice doing this, that movement is too sexual, it's not classical enough, the costume is wrong."

Wheeldon sighs.

"I was intensely daunted. Eventually I had to say firmly to the dancers, you have to believe in this piece for yourselves, and to trust me, because I am your eyes and I won't make you look ridiculous."

There were also complaints that he wasn't doing a straightforward narrative.

"I was uncomfortable with the idea of trying to tell Hamlet in 25 minutes. I didn't want the ghost to be a suit of armour clanking around making big shadows, but that's what some of them wanted. One old ballet master kept coming up to me sadly: 'Chris, this is a story ballet.' "

However, the music, Arvo Pärt's Third Symphony, had inspired him with the idea of creating a powerful inner dramatic momentum in which, though the dancers suggest Hamlet, Gertrude or Ophelia, a mysterious, melancholy poetic force evolves, redolent of Shakespeare's play without being descriptive.

For Maria Alexandrova, the fiery ballerina leading the cast, Elsinore was a revelatory and loving experience.

"It's not often you can unite the company in the way that our cast was united on this piece, working as one. Sometimes you had to repress what your ego wanted to do, because you could break this precious material otherwise."

One can just about see how, to a dinosaur old guard, the Wheeldon was a provocation; the Twyla Tharp, of course, would be an outrage. But Ratmansky has been no less controversial by rehabilitating Class Concert, a ballet by one of Grigorovich's hated

controversial by rehabilitating Class Concert, a ballet by one of Grigorovich's hated predecessors, Asaf Messerer.

Messerer's nephew, former Bolshoi principal Mikhail Messerer, who is restaging it, says

it reveals that the Bolshoi used to dance with a clean, crisp footwork and expressive classicism that was sacrificed under Grigorovich to big-scale athleticism.

"Ironically, Class Concert was the Bolshoi's calling-card abroad. Impresarios for foreign tours always asked for it, so it would be rehearsed here, but Grigorovich disliked my uncle and ensured it would never be performed by 'his' dancers."

"For instance, though Messerer was a much-loved ballet master here, Irek Mukhamedov could not attend his classes because it would anger Grigorovich."

Such labyrinthine inner forces are hard for a Westerner to understand, but then the identification of the Bolshoi Ballet with the USSR's political requirements is the legacy that the reformers battle with - every artistic decision carries some kind of office-political baggage.

As the company arrives in London with a dazzling array of old and new to show us, Ratmansky has slain some of the dragons, at least temporarily.

He has renewed his contract as director until October 2008, when the main theatre reopens after its colossal renovation, and the company moves back from the smaller New Stage next door which, to the visionary Ratmansky, has been a golden opportunity to take creative risks impossible in the vast main theatre.

However it may look to his Russian critics, from a Western stand Ratmansky appears a master-juggler, keeping all the Bolshoi's numerous balls in the air - old and new, academic and theatrical, Soviet and Imperial.

With its tremendous dancers awakening with all their formidable tradition to new choreographic skills, the Bolshoi looks right now like the healthiest company in the world.

- The Bolshoi season is at the Coliseum, London WC2 (0870 145 0200), July 30-Aug 18; the triple bill Aug 13 & 14