Natalia Bessmertnova

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Natalia Bessmertnova, who died yesterday aged 66, was for almost 30 years the leading ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and her flawless grace won her a worldwide recognition independent of the fact that she was the company director's wife.

Throughout the Cold War, as the Bolshoi Ballet toured the West, its iron director and sole choreographer Yuri Grigorovich created an impression with his aggressive ballets that seemed almost entirely palatable when Natalia Bessmertnova was dancing the female lead.

An extraordinarily beautiful woman with Byzantine features, who kept her long dark hair until her death, she spoke and moved softly, yet under her gentle exterior was a

matchless technical strength that enabled her to conquer an unusually wide range of ballets, from classics to contemporary.

Her career inside Grigorovich's Bolshoi Ballet somewhat resembled that of Margot Fonteyn in the Royal Ballet, in that the choreographer made her his dominant muse for decades, at the cost of many other ballerinas' advance.

However, as with Fonteyn, and despite the complex politics of the Bolshoi, there was little doubt in the company that Bessmertnova was a star by right, at least in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the bitterness and enmity that Grigorovich inspired in the established stars he sidelined -such as Maya Plisetskaya - was never transferred to the dancer herself.

Natalia Bessmertnova was unexpectedly rewarding to watch in that she had a lyrical, even mournful appearance, with a long-limbed, pliable body and exceptionally eloquent neck, and yet a deceptive transformative ability.

Her delicate, somewhat ageless look was belied by her fearlessness, as she committed herself wholeheartedly to the spectacularly acrobatic overhead lifts which became Grigorovich's trademark, particularly noted in Spartacus, in which at one point the

heroine Phrygia resembles a starfish balancing on Spartacus's outstretched hand.

It was a mark of Natalia Bessmertnova's grace and integrity that she rescued such feats from any suggestion of the circus. She was unusually gifted as a theatre artist, with musical and velvety phrasing and an aura of profundity that suggested depth even in Grigorovich's more tokenist female roles.

Despite being the emblematic ballerina of the flagship Soviet ballet, she performed Giselle with an exquisite sense of being removed from this world that made her one of the handful of iconic performers of the role in dance history.

Natalia Igorevna Bessmertnova was born in Moscow on July 19 1941, the elder of two daughters of a doctor, both of whom would join the Bolshoi Ballet.

She started full-time ballet training aged 12, and on graduation from the Bolshoi's ballet school in 1961 made an immediate international impact when she performed The Dying Swan at the Parma ballet festival, delighting Italian critics.

She joined the Bolshoi Ballet in the same year, under its veteran director Leonid Lavrovksy, and at once danced leads in a wide range of classics such as Swan Lake, Don Quixote, The Fountain of Bakhchisarai and Chopiniana. She was chosen for the title parts of Lavrovsky's new 1963 production of Giselle and Goleizovsky's 1964 Leili and Medjnun.

When, in 1965, Lavrovsky was supplanted by the younger, more contemporary Yuri Grigorovich, the latter at once made Bessmertnova his leading ballerina for the new style of ballets he intended to create. They married soon after.

The leading English critic Clement Crisp recalled how Grigorovich told him: "I married my first wife [the Kirov ballerina Alla Shelest] for her intelligence, and my second [Bessmertnova] for her beauty."

Bessmertnova starred in Grigorovich's first Moscow staging of his recent Kirov creation The Legend of Love (1965), then originated the ballerina roles of his entire subsequent oeuvre: Spartacus (1968), Ivan the Terrible (1975), Angara (1976) and The Golden Age (1982), and his new versions of Romeo and Juliet (1979) and Raymonda (1984), as well as his restagings of classics such as Swan Lake and The Nutcracker.

In all, her repertory encompassed some 30 roles, an exceptionally large number inside Russia, which was very short of new choreography.

For British balletomanes she acquired added interest on tours in the 1980s by virtue of her virile and much younger partner, Irek Mukhamedov, the spectacular new Bolshoi star who revitalised her career in her mid-forties, in the same way as the young Russian Rudolf Nureyev had revitalised Margot Fonteyn's.

In 1990 Mukhamedov would move to London and join the Royal Ballet. Their performances in Raymonda exist on film, as do several other performances by Bessmertnova, including Juliet and Swan Lake.

Natalia Bessmertnova retired from dancing in 1988, aged 47, having performed some 1,500 times at the Bolshoi and around the world.