Ekaterina Maximova

Ekaterina Maximova, who died suddenly in Moscow yesterday aged 70, was one of the Soviet Union's most illustrious ballerinas, and half of the most celebrated partnership in Russian ballet history.

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A tiny, ravishingly pretty woman, Ekaterina Maximova formed "the Golden Couple of the 20th Century", as the Russians called them, with her husband, Vladimir Vasiliev. Enduring more than 30 years on stage, their partnership far outlived the Fonteyn-Nureyev pairing, and was no less renowned in the dance world.

Husband-wife partnerships are uncommon in first-league ballet, and the union of performers both equally ranked at the highest level arguably remains unique to this day. Maximova made an exquisitely feminine counterpart to her forceful and heroically-built husband, the Bolshoi's leading man for a generation. Their partnership, which began in their first year at ballet school when they were 10, became the Bolshoi's most sought-after calling card in world tours, notably in the troupe's signature ballet, Spartacus.

In that ballet's 1968 production, the choreographer Yuri Grigorovich summed up all that was most awesome and compelling about the Bolshoi of the Cold War period, with the company portraying a mighty revolution against a tyrannical emperor led by an irresistible hero (Vasiliev), himself inspired by a loving, porcelain-delicate wife (Maximova). The story was emblematically Soviet and yet the theatricality of Grigorovich's choreography has ensured the ballet remains to this day a Bolshoi favourite, famed for its extravagant lyricism and eye-catching lifts, devised originally for the birdlike Maximova.

The Bolshoi tour to London the following year was dominated by the smash-hit impact of Spartacus in which, wrote the leading critic Richard Buckle, "Maximova would melt

any tyrant's heart".

The great male dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov recently paid tribute to the couple, stating that partnership in life was no guarantee of stage success. Spiritual compatibility was necessary, and, he said, Maximova, with her "elegant build, beauty, virtuosity and even more so her spontaneity and sincerity", was treated like a "rare treasure" by the indomitable Vasiliev. This gave their performances an almost sacred aura, to which audiences gratefully responded.

None the less, Ekaterina Maximova was equally acclaimed in her own right as a prima ballerina, notably in the early Romantic ballet Giselle, which she learned from the greatest of 20th-century Russian Giselles, Galina Ulanova, and later as the comic bravura heroine of Don Quixote, where she displayed a magnetic sparkle that to this day is spoken of as the benchmark.

Her incarnation of Princess Aurora in The Sleeping Beauty had a warmth and radiance that for many viewers was ideal, and she then showed powerful dramatic acting colours in tragic roles such as Tatiana in John Cranko's Onegin (which she danced at English National Ballet in 1989) and the titular role of Anyuta, her husband's ballet on a Chekhov short story.

Born in Moscow on February 1 1939, Ekaterina Sergeevna Maximova wanted to be an actress from her early years, and made her debut as a child actor in an opera on the Bolshoi stage aged just nine. Her application to ballet school was at first greeted with doubt as she was small for her age, but as her mother was tall, it was decided that she would grow sufficiently.

But Maximova remained small, and even in adulthood was dubbed the Bolshoi's "baby ballerina". She was also called "Madame No", for her habit of refusing interviews, offers and photocalls – she explained once that it was fear that made her first reaction to most things negative. She later used the title Madame Nyet for her autobiography.

By the time of her graduation in 1958 from the Moscow ballet school, Ekaterina Maximova had already been picked out for the Bolshoi. But a remarkable ballet demonstration in spring that year revealed that she was just one of a phenomenal generation of young talent. Vasiliev and Maximova were matched by the Kirov starlets Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Yuri Soloviev from Leningrad. They were all to acquire global fame, and Nureyev and Vasiliev maintained a friendly rivalry until Nureyev defected to the West.

Within a year of starting in the Bolshoi, Ekaterina Maximova was chosen by Grigorovich to star in his new ballet The Stone Flower alongside Vasiliev, by now her husband. Her appeal across the Bolshoi's copious stable of choreographers – to Grigorovich, Leonid Lavrovsky, Vasily Vainonen, Rostislav Zakharov and Kasyan Goleizovsky – gave her an unprecedented range of roles, from pure 19th-century classics to the Soviet version of cutting-edge innovation.

On the Bolshoi's debut tour to America in 1959, Maximova was already being spotted by critics. Her triumphant Moscow debuts as Giselle, Jeanne in Vainonen's exciting Flames of Paris and Maria in The Fountain of Bakhchisarai were capped by her sensational success with her husband at the 1964 Varna international ballet competition, where Vasiliev added to their gold medal with the only Grand Prix ever awarded.

Although Maximova then scored tremendous new success with her brilliant portrayal of the spirited Kitri in Don Quixote, again with her husband, relations were turning sour with Grigorovich, against whom factions were arising inside the Bolshoi.

In the 1970s and 1980s Vasiliev and Maximova began developing their own contemporary ballet, touring abroad, and working on new ballets with Western choreographers, notably Maurice Béjart and Roland Petit. Vasiliev himself turned increasingly to choreography, creating strikingly physical ballets for Maximova and himself, such as Icarus and Anyuta.

After leaving the Bolshoi in 1988, she became a sought-after coach, working with Moscow's other two companies, the Kremlin Ballet and the Moscow Classical Ballet, and on the dance faculty of Russian Academy of Theatre Arts. After Grigorovich was replaced as the Bolshoi's director by her husband in the late 1990s, she returned to coach there too.

Last winter the Bolshoi hosted a week-long festival dedicated to Maximova and

Vasiliev's 50 years on the Bolshoi stage, during which Vasiliev commented that Fonteyn had turned Nureyev into a proper partner: the secret of partnering was "the man must not get in the way of the woman – she is the most important person on stage." He added that all his life his wife had been his inspiration for two qualities: her beauty and her capacity for hard work.

Ekaterina Maximova was a People's Artist of Russia and recently launched a foundation to help retired dancers in hardship. She is survived by her husband. They had no children.