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The Kirov's baby ballerina


Photo: Sasha Gusov

This year the Kirov has brought a new young star to its London season. Uliana Lopatkina talks to Ismene Brown

SHE is 5 ft 9 in, and has enormous hands and size 8 feet. These are not things you might associate with a baby ballerina. Nor is Uliana Lopatkina's shortish auburn bob typical of the coiffure normally seen on Kirov Ballet stars. But this 23-year-old Crimean girl with the long slender limbs is certainly a star - she has been an artistic sensation at the Russian company's summer season in London.

Her performances have been greeted with unanimous critical delight; Lopatkina has made the kind of impact that a young dancer could only dream about.

The reviews are pinned up daily - translated - backstage at the Coliseum, and though Lopatkina says it doesn't make any difference to her status in the company, one can't help noticing that the Kirov's usual capricious last-minute casting changes this time round seem to reflect appreciation of Lopatkina's success.

In person she is reticent, with a swan neck and infrequent smile - an image in contrast to her bare-midriffed odalisque writhing on the cover of the Kirov's programme. Being so bendy, she has long got used to portraying concubines, curling herself daintily around moustachioed pashas in the harem ballets that only the Kirov would dare stage so seriously. This week she is jealous Zarema in *The Fountains of Bakhchisarai* and Zobeide in *Sheherazade*.

But by nature she is clearly not a flaunter. *Swan Lake*'s spirituality and emotional depth are more her metier. Lopatkina seduces not just with her body but with the quality of her mind.

"Ballet is an old art - the important thing is to reveal yourself in the role, treat it seriously, not just do it for show. Whichever role I'm doing, I try to use everything inside to the utmost, though obviously it alters according to the physical or moral condition of the character," she says.

The "moral" side is important to Lopatkina. She is strong-minded, a believer in destiny, though she corrects me when I suggest that part of the power of the old classics is an almost religious element. "Not religious - *human*," she says.

Like so many ballerinas before her, she was sent away from home at the age of 10 to the great Vaganova Academy in Leningrad, where her exceptional height did not prove a handicap. "I was one of three tall girls in my year, and though controlling coordination is harder for a tall dancer, I didn't have problems. I have always found it comfortable to interpret music with my body. I can feel the physical phrases - it comes naturally."

SHE won the school's top prize and joined the Kirov at 17; her height has naturally made

her a favourite partner for Igor Zelensky, the company's spectacular leading man, 6 ft 2 in tall. Unlike Zelensky, though, she is not keen yet to guest in foreign companies. She has seen almost none of the choreographers whom we take for granted here - Jerome Robbins, Kenneth MacMillan, Frederick Ashton, Maurice Béjart - and for the moment is immersed in classical repertoire.

She is single and confesses that she used to be "very romantic", a cinemaholic as a youngster, with a taste for sob-stories. Now she looks for "deeper feelings, not superficial things" - an adaptation of *Dignity and Prejudice*, as Austen's novel was quaintly translated, was on television in St Petersburg recently and she was hooked.

Not by Colin Firth's Mr Darcy (of whom she says drily, "It would be far from my mind to think of him as a sex symbol"), but by its "realism, the way step by step it drew me in, a delicate, gentle building up of feelings that I think of as English style."

The Russians are enjoying themselves on this London trip, she says, "because we have had enough time to prepare, calmly and quietly" - which is the nearest she comes to referring to the managerial scandals that have dogged the Kirov for the past three years.\

They all stay in the same hotel and practise for hours daily at dance studios nearby. It is a long, tough day. There is little time for sightseeing, but in any case it is dangerous for dancers, says Lopatkina. Walking on pavements is bad for feet that that evening are going to be squashed into pink satin pointe shoes.

On the subject of shoes, why are the Russians making such a clatter on stage? This year the wispiest-looking *corps de ballet* in the world is sounding positively thunderous.

Lopatkina winces. It is something to do with "glue and technology", she says. The shoes are made in Moscow's top factory and they have got to last the tour. British dancers may be able to afford 30 pairs a fortnight at £22 a time, but the Russians are paid much less. In the fortnight so far Lopatkina has used just four pairs.

And with that, she quietly excuses herself. She has to go and put reinforcing stitches in those valuable shoes.

The Kirov season runs at the Coliseum until August 9. Tickets: 0171 632 8300. Telegraph box office: 0541 557000