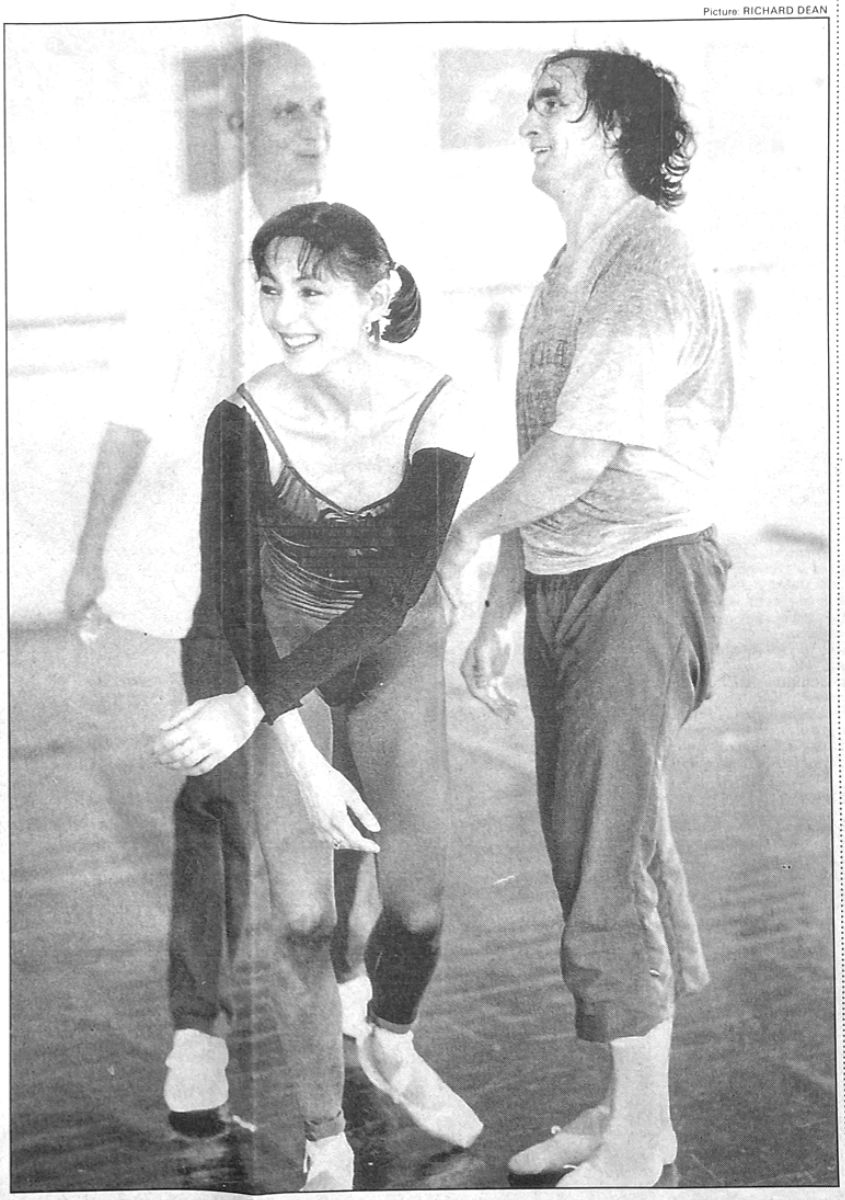
Britain is about to witness a remarkable Russian dance partnership. The pair talk to **Ismene Brown**

Ballet's dream team

Picture: RICHARD DEAN



Dance to the music of time: Altynai Asylmuratova and Irek Mukhamedov, pictured in rehearsal with choreographer Roland Petit, are both approaching 40 and a watershed in their careers

AN AMBITIOUS young ballet dancer needs spies. He needs a check kept on the opposition at a vital competition where he has heard whispers about an unknown rival. What does he do? He sends his wife to report back.

Which is how two of the greatest dancers of our time first met. The wife was Altynai Asylmuratova, then in the *corps de ballet* at the Kirov. Her husband was Konstantin Zaklinsky, a leading young Kirov lion. The threat — and the winner of the Grand Prix at the 1981 Moscow International Ballet Competition — was 21-year-old Irek Mukhamedov.

Nearly two decades later both Asylmuratova and Mukhamedov have risen to the top, she becoming the exquisite Kirov ballerina *assoluta*, he becoming first the epitome of athletic Bolshoi masculinity, and then, in his second career at the Royal Ballet, probably the most dramatically gifted classical male dancer of his time.

They were united briefly at Covent Garden a few years ago, in *La Bayadère* and *Raymonda*, but the two stars have blazed in their separate galaxies. Now, however, they are about to dance together, when Irek's company of invited Russians visits Sadler's Wells in London (from October 19 to 23).

"I remember seeing Altynai at that competition," says Irek, looking at his beautiful, black-eyed partner. "I saw her in the audience when I was dancing. I introduced myself. Altynai means 'golden moon', and I could see at once that she looks like her name — she *is* an *altynai*."

She laughs, adding something in Russian, which Irek translates: "'Irek is a real man dancing. Strong, expressive, huge . . .'." He looks suddenly alarmed (his weight problem is notorious). "He has a big scale for the stage," Altynai chips in in broken English, "heroic grace."

For years all they knew of each other was their reputations. Irek did not see Altynai dancing until a Kirov visit to London after his defection. The mutually jealous Moscow-based Bolshoi and Kirov in St Petersburg would never deign to watch each other (last year the companies visited each other's cities for the first time for 21 years).

That blinkered arrogance is what both dancers have reacted against, Irek by quitting Russia in 1990, Altynai by staying at her classical base, and taking up invitations extended by the great companies of America, France and Britain. Communism fell just in time to release her, at her peak, from the routine artistic jail of dancing only the same handful of roles for 20 years.

She struck up with the veteran French choreographer Roland Petit in Marseilles a few years ago. Now 75 and one of the most charismatic figures in 20th-century ballet, he has reworked his 1997 pas de deux *Bolero* for the two stars to dance in London. It's a 20-minute seduction, which begins with them parading haughtily in boxing robes and ends (you may not be surprised) in erotic capitulation. Clichéd, undoubtedly, but the kind of glamorous tease that ballet does so well and is rarely seen in major-company repertoire.

WATCHING the pair rehearse to the haunting Ravel melody inescapably associated with Torvill and Dean, in a studio in Geneva lined with photographs of other immortal dancing partnerships — Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov, Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins — I find the contrast of the cat-like, petite woman and the big, rumpled man very touching. They are both nearing 40, and in a profession so physically centred as ballet is today, they are both facing a watershed.

Irek, now downgraded to guest artist at the Royal Ballet, has several big performances ahead in its opening season, but his dancing future will increasingly depend on freelance dates. Altynai was fielded occasionally by the Kirov in their successful New York season this summer, whereas she used to dominate the roster. Her association with Petit has brought her sensual new roles such as his famous Carmen and Chéri, but now the world is flooded with top Russian dancers seeking guest engagements. In this more commercial era, getting it wrong is far more damaging to an artist than in the cushioned comfort of a national company.

As Irek says enviously, his lissom partner will find age easier to fend off than he does. "She will always look aesthetic. She can carry on. If I had stayed in Russia, by now I presume I'd be kicked out of the Bolshoi, but still be travelling round dancing Spartacus terribly, and one day break my neck on stage."

Back in St Petersburg, with their six-year-old daughter, Altynai's husband, Zaklinsky, is teaching his successors, a switch she herself expects to make soon, and says she will find fulfilling. Continuity of coaching is the main reason for the Kirov's classical supremacy — as well as its reluctance to change.

Altynai and Irek debate the differences between the Kirov and the Bolshoi. "It's like the difference between the cities," says Altynai. "Moscow is more a business centre; the people who live there have more energy, want to be ahead. In St Petersburg life is slo-o-ow." She draws out the word.

"In Moscow," Irek states, "people behave in a less cultured way."

So, I say, Altynai has lived through the organised tyranny of the Soviet Union and is now living through the chaotic liberalisation of today. How is it changing the passionate pride that Russians take in ballet?

"Some things are better. For young dancers it is much easier to become a principal. But at the same time it's so quick that they are not mentally ready."

"And they miss the important things," adds Irek. "Altynai worries because the soul of ballet itself may quickly disappear, because this young generation is raised so quickly that they are just exhibitionists, and only concerned to get ahead fast. Soul is going, pride is going. And natural relationships between teacher and dancer, between dancers and their tradition, these are going."

But surely the Kirov and Bolshoi *must* change? We have seen the symptoms of stagnation on their recent London visits. What is the best way to change? The ballerina sighs heavily. "To keep true to our classical style. And to take the best from the West, because the West usually takes the best from Russia and nothing comes back in return."

Irek, an example of what the West took away, counters that he owes his attitude to Russia. "I was brought up to do only one thing, and that I must do that thing the best I could. For me, the more challenges I have to face, the more exciting my life is. Here in the West, I think it is this that is lacking: the idea that you go beyond what you expect, that you don't get to a wall and then say, 'Oh I can't do that,' and stop."

For older dancers of ordinary talent, stopping, or being sacked, is something inevitable, and even welcome. For the greats it is different. Baryshnikov astutely went modern, following his instincts, and still dances in his fifties. For Altynai and Irek, who need their classical art so much and who still have so much to show us, the way is not so simple.