

Hurled through the air, her body a  
an extraordinary new Royal Ballet

mass of bruises, superstar ballerina Sylvie Guillem is risking everything for  
commission. Ismene Brown reports

# Sylvie and the Boyz

**T**rust me," says Michael Nunn, grinning untrustworthily. Sylvie Guillem, superstar ballerina, grimaces as she sits on the floor. Suddenly, electrifyingly, she launches herself into the air, to be caught by her bird-like hip-bones by Nunn, way over his head. "Don't worry, you're insured!" he quips. "I'm not!" she protests, looking like Concorde being plucked out of the sky.

My jaw drops. I have never seen any dance look so fantastically risky as what is going on in rehearsals for *Broken Fall*, the new ballet for Guillem, Nunn and William Trevitt – popularly known as the Ballet Boyz – to be performed at the Royal Ballet next week. It is by the choreographer Russell Maliphant, whose male duets have become the Boyz' signature demonstration of their exceptional partnership in work for their own company, George Piper Dances.

Maliphant quietly films the three, letting them bicker. The movement he's getting from them feels as light as tumbleweed spilling down a windy road. But achieving it is all bumps and grinds. Plummeting downwards, Guillem's cheek grazes Trevitt's stubby chin and they wince as shoulders collide. It's extreme sport, until – with any luck – it turns into extreme art.

Later, in her dressing room, Guillem bubbles over with delight. At 38 she still combines a wiry tomboy body and green-eyed beauty, even if the roots of her long red hair glimmer with grey. She is much mellowed from the spiky, shy girl who rebelled against Rudolf Nureyev's regime at the Paris Opera Ballet and defected to London 15 years ago. Nowadays she is not "Mademoiselle Non" but "Mademoiselle Oui", willing to walk the highest wire for a choreographer whom she admires.

"Yes, it's really exciting to do. You feel really powerful but at the same time you need to keep it really calm – and it gives you a headache! Your head is upside-down so you need to get a different view of the space, and you need to concentrate not just for yourself but for the two others. Because my body is quite long and I'm not so close to the floor, for me to go on to the knee and come back can be painful – things I knew I needed to work a little bit on. I told Russell,

“Your head is upside-down – and it gives you a headache”

"Don't worry! It's going to come!" And I hope he trusted me and he saw that it would come eventually. I mean, I just had to work it out a little in my head. But I have bruises everywhere!"

Maliphant's way of moving captivates her – when he demonstrates, he moves in a boneless swirl, like water down a pipe. "So soft it looks. But when you try it, my God, you use every part of your body, every little muscle. And also as a partner he is so soft! It's really pleasant, because you never feel any shock. It's smoothed away."

Guillem has put most of the classical tutu ballets behind her, declaring that she has lost interest in *The Sleeping Beauty*, *La Bayadere* and the like.

With her tall, idiosyncratically limber body and restless nature, she has spent much of her glittering career yearning for new choreographers to use her. With Maliphant, it looks as if she is finally getting something special – and yet the unthinkable is looming. Her contract expires this year. Talks have yet to be held in

Covent Garden about this potentially momentous event, and Guillem's mobile face clouds doubtfully. "I do *Prodigal Son* with Carlos [Acosta], and then *Romeo and Juliet* may be my last performances. Because it depends what I can do here. I don't want to get bored."

She brightens again. At last, after years of being perceived as her burden, her gymnastic childhood is coming in handy to meet Maliphant's challenges. "Yes, it brings back the feeling I had when I was a gymnast, when the body was freer. I like to push myself as far as I can go."

Then, she learned to face terrors such as the hated beam with the support of her parents; now it is Nunn and Trevitt whom she must trust, or "I will break my head, like anybody. But they are strong, and when I tell them, listen, this is scary for me, even if they are joking I know they will be there."

The work is so interdependent that if one of the men is indisposed for any of the five performances, she will not risk it with a substitute – an understudy trio will step in. If she is off, though, Nunn and



Mademoiselle Oui: Sylvie Guillem, left, rehearses for a production that could be among her last for the Royal Ballet. Top: Guillem with Michael Nunn, and above, with William Trevitt, the Ballet Boyz

Trevitt can pull in their George Piper Dances ballerina Oxana Panchenko.

Because, for all the Royal Ballet lustre of this engagement, it is a George Piper commission. Nunn, 36, and Trevitt, 34, are back at their old home, this time as masters. They left the Royal Ballet five years ago, relatively unknown, but set on running their own innovative company; now, just back from a lauded US tour, they are world stars.

Deceptive casualness is their hallmark: their larky video diaries and TV documentaries have won them a Channel 4 series for next year. A danced *Messiah* is in planning with the National Theatre's Nicholas Hytner and star choreographer Christopher Wheeldon. "Everything we've done I'm pleased with," says Trevitt. "We are pretty much where we wanted to be, and we haven't had to compromise with our beliefs too much. We've done some things – usually stupid things for marketing to sell the show – but in





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terms of what we've produced on stage, I have no complaints at all."

Meanwhile they dance, and the new Maliphant heads the attractions of their next GPD tour from March, with possible Guillem appearances. "It depends what else she's doing," says Trevitt. "Six weeks in the studio with Sylvie and Russell has been a big treat. She's probably the world's most spectacular ballerina, but it's her intelligence and integrity that I admire. I am super-impressed that she hasn't lost her hunger for new challenges. We pestered her to come and see Russell's work for us at The Place and she really liked it. I guess what's happened now is a unique arrangement with the Opera House, because the Royal Ballet have scheduled it, but it belongs to us."

The combined celebrity of his dancers is lost on Maliphant, fortunately a man of Zen calm. The serenity of his dances is as interesting as their powerful fluidity; they draw poetically on the hyper-control and elasticity of

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martial arts such as Brazil's capoeira and Japan's judo, and yet they throb with expression. What intrigues about his duets is that they carry such a clear message about men together that does not demonstrate sexuality, and yet evokes strong feelings.

This was what attracted Nunn and Trevitt, lifelong friends as well as colleagues. Maliphant was on their wish-list when they helped found the breakaway company K Ballet, under another Royal Ballet colleague, Tetsuya Kumakawa – only K Ballet didn't turn out as innovative as they'd hoped. "And then they left Teddy," recalls Maliphant, "phoned me up and said, 'We'd like to do *Critical Mass*, we've been learning sections from the video.' And they'd actually learned the whole thing. I thought, well done, guys."

He was also rather envious of their relationship. Now 42, he had a long Sadler's Wells Ballet career, but had found it offputting that "there wasn't much understanding if you were two straight men

together." The Ballet Boyz were refreshing: "They weren't afraid of being intimate."

Guillem observes that their intuitive dance partnership owes much to their being "a real couple – in their friendship they match each other, complete each other. As two people in the street and in the work, it's the same. They are made to be friends, real friends."

Bringing in the lustrously feminine Guillem, I suggest to Maliphant, could rock the happy male boat. On the contrary, he says, it has enabled development. "I've heard that she can be a prima donna if she doesn't like the work she's doing. But she's been fantastic. We grew it, in a way. We tried to do things bigger. So it's not a pass, it's a throw; a lift isn't just up here – it's *way* up there. Hopefully the intimacy can still work, but I think we've been able to go further because a less fearless dancer would have said 'no' earlier than Sylvie has."

The Royal Ballet's artistic director Monica Mason is intensely

**Stretched to the limit: left to right, Sylvie Guillem, William Trevitt and Michael Nunn. "They are strong," says Guillem, "and when I tell them, this is scary for me, I know they will listen"**

looking forward to opening night. She keenly watches contemporary dance, and thinks it's time for Covent Garden to lasso in the fine ballet-grown choreographers who escaped into that world: "It's so easy to overlook people closest to you. Hence my interest in Russell." And in Wayne McGregor, another contemporary man whose new creation appears on the bill with Maliphant's. Her eye is also on commissioning Christopher Bruce, Michael Clark and more Maliphant in time.

I sense that this programme will be significant for all its participants. For Mason, as a declaration of faith in British choreographic talent; for Maliphant, hitting a major stage; for George Piper Dances, returning to Covent Garden as world players; and for Guillem. It may be among the last things she does at the Royal Ballet; then again, she may have found the role of a lifetime.

Royal Ballet mixed programme, Covent Garden, Dec 3-12 (020 7304 4000).