

## Dynasty

The Messerer family by Ismene Brown

When Carlos Acosta danced *Spartacus* with the Bolshoi Ballet in London last summer, the man, the time and the place united the strands of a most extraordinary story in ballet, a story of peregrination, of dreadful reverses, of the pursuit of civilisation, of holding on to the best of human values in despairing times. This might, yes, describe Acosta's own story (captivatingly told in his new memoir *No Way Home* (see page 8) – but there is a more epic tale at issue here. It is the story of a dynasty of very great teachers and performers, the Messerers of Moscow.

Cuba, Moscow, London – the Messerers join up the world's great ballet schools. In Moscow Asaf Messerer became the first great teacher, his nephew Azary Plisetsky flew off from Russia to shape the academic style of Alonso's Cuban ballet, and now in London another of Asaf's nephews Mikhail (Misha) Messerer transmits the pure Russian style of Asaf's day to the international Royal Ballet troupe. Meanwhile Irek Mukhamedov, the Royal Ballet and Bolshoi superstar, owes his breakthrough to a third Asaf nephew, Naum Azarin-Messerer.

Acosta felt a strong sense of déjà vu when he danced with the Bolshoi. 'I was very inspired by taking class with the Bolshoi, how well everybody executed steps and how much common ground I felt with them. I could see a lot of resemblance to our school in Cuba. Early on I trained with Lazaro Carreño in Havana, and Lazaro studied at the Kirov under Pushkin, as well as being one of the dancers Azary Plisetsky was training to dance with Alicia Alonso. I could see the resemblance between that schooling Lazaro taught me and the Russian school.

'Azary brought to the boys the jumps and the princeliness, the way you place your hand. Alicia believed that anything that went wrong in pas de deux was the boy's fault – Azary taught it that way. We learned where to put our hands at the age of 15, so by 18 or 19 you knew very well how to partner with care. Then when I started to take Misha Messerer's classes here in the Royal Ballet, I found it very pure, very traditional Russian schooling, and very kind in his approach.'

Kindness is a word that crops up repeatedly when dancers discuss the Messerer teachers, starting with Asaf, whose class was legendary at the Bolshoi. 'Asaf belongs on the Mount Olympus of ballet,' wrote his niece, the legendary ballerina Maya Plisetskaya in her 1994 autobiography *I, Maya Plisetskaya*. 'A brilliant dancer, he was the source of many technical tricks and pioneered a virtuoso style of solo male classical dance. An outstanding teacher – his class heals legs. I would hurry to his class almost every morning of my conscious ballet life. His students included Galina Ulanova, Vladimir Vasiliev, Ekaterina Maximova. He is a quiet, steady and friendly man. Everyone loves him at the theatre.'

Asaf (1903-92) had started teaching at the Bolshoi when only 20, and he developed a class of rare logic and care. In 1954 he was put in charge of grooming the top dancers in the *classe de perfectionnement*. His method, progressing from exact delineation of the basic positions to exuberant jumps and turns, is preserved theatrically in his ballet *Class Concert*, which his nephew Misha Messerer staged for the Bolshoi in 2007 in a landmark production. It was the first time this ballet had been performed on the Bolshoi stage since



Alicia Alonso and Azary Plisetsky in the Russo-Cuban *Don Quixote*, 1968

it had been banished by the incoming Bolshoi director in 1964, Yuri Grigorovich. A thread that runs through the Messerer story almost to this day is the antipathy between Grigorovich and the Messerers. Asaf Messerer represented an academic purity of dancing style that the new winds blowing in the early Sixties in the Soviet Union decided was old-hat. Grigorovich was the energetic young creator of big, athletic, emotional modern ballets with earthy, turned-in runs and spectacular lifts, dancing on a massive scale that had little room for batterie or nuanced épaulement. Dancers who took Asaf's class under the new regime were seen as making an aesthetic statement against Grigorovich and they suffered for it. In time, though, official disapproval had the contrary result of sowing the Messerer seeds around the world.

**B**ut let us begin with the founder of the dynasty – a dentist, a cultured and religious man, Mikhail Borisovich Messerer (1866-1942), who lived and practised in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. His first wife, Sima, had borne him seven children – five surviving – when in 1907 Messerer moved his large family to Moscow.

In her life story Maya, his eldest grandchild, described this warm-hearted dentist in whose surgery she loved to play: 'Grandfather was not tall. Thick Brezhnev-like eyebrows, a massive nose, round bald head, well-fed, if not fat. He walked with dignity, playfully waving his carved stick with a figured top, which he rarely failed to use. He had much to be proud of. His fillings held a long time.'

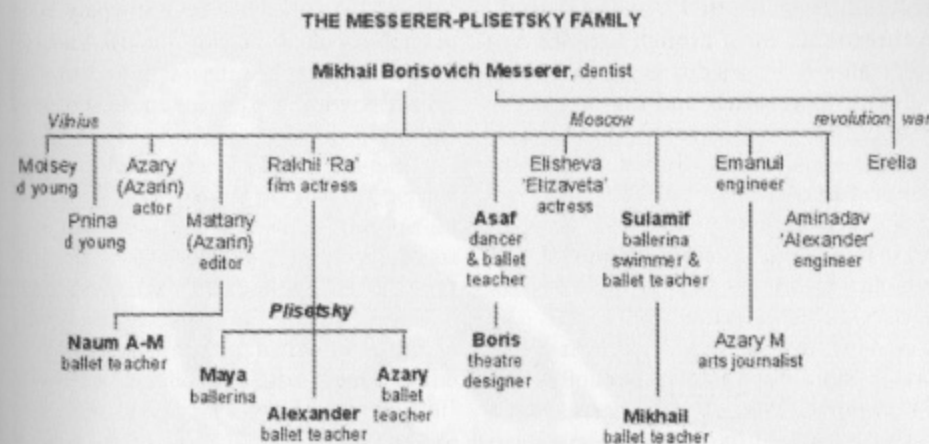
So too did his cultured genes. Misha was not born when his grandfather died, but he heard endlessly about him from the family: 'He spoke eight languages – he decided to learn English in his seventies, just in order to read Shakespeare. He was a great fan of Moscow Arts Theatre, and

took his grandchildren to the theatre. When they came back from the play, he'd open the book of the play and ask them to comment. They'd then all play out the roles at home. He was very intelligent and artistic.'

Sima bore Mikhail ten children over some 25 years; when he was 74 he added an eleventh to his tribe by his second wife Raisa. Proudly Jewish, he gave all his children Biblical names, which led, says Maya, to 'cares and woes' in Soviet times as anti-Semitism mounted. (Some of the children adopted more Russian names to get work.) He died when he was 76, during the war in evacuation from Moscow in Kuibyshev, with his youngest child Erella just two. The Germans were on the rampage. He had lived through Imperial Russia, Bolshevik Russia and the threat of a Nazi Russia. He had many blessings in his children's success – Asaf and Sulamif were Bolshoi Ballet stars, Azary, Rakhil and Elisheva all celebrated actors, and three sons in steadier jobs in engineering and publishing. Maya, the eldest grandchild, was promising to be another great dancer.

Still, the last years of Mikhail Borisovich's life were full of ghastly events in his family as Stalin ratcheted up his persecution of his own people: the sudden deaths of two sons, the arrest, torture and imprisonment of two other children and his son-in-law. Those were the times. He was not to know the tremendous flowering of his family in Moscow and world ballet that would take place over the rest of the century, nourished even more in adversity.

No doubt fed by his father's passion for theatre, Azary (1897-1937) was the first of five siblings to take to the theatre. He joined the Moscow Arts Theatre under the catchier name of Azary Azarin, and became one of Moscow's most distinguished dramatic actors. He died aged only 40 of a heart attack at the height of Stalin's terrors, strained by the closing of his beloved



theatre and the arrest of his sister Rakhil's husband.

A year later in 1938, his brother Mattany (1898-1957), who also took the surname Azarin, was to suffer arrest, torture and eight years' imprisonment. The editor of a Communist newspaper, he had begun to be disillusioned by Stalin's bloody repressions, and his wife denounced him to the KGB. Inside prison theatre became his lifeline, but on his release at the end of the war he never recovered his health.

His son, Naum (1934-89), however, was growing up with the theatre gene firmly in place – he would become one of the family's six ballet teachers. In his capacity as ballet master to the Moscow Classical Ballet in the 1970s and 80s, he coached Irek Mukhamedov and Vladimir Malakhov, and both have acknowledged his seminal effect on their future stardom. Mukhamedov was a rising but not wildly ambitious young soloist inside this touring company when to universal amazement he swept the Grand Prix at the 1981 Moscow International Ballet Competition. According to Jeffrey Taylor's 1994 biography of Mukhamedov Naum Azarin had sensed that the lad was more than a 'jump-

ing machine' (although as it happens a jump that Naum created for Irek is enshrined in the choreography of MacMillan's *The Judas Tree*, MacMillan having much admired it when Irek showed it to him).

Taylor writes: '[Naum] would take Mukhamedov to his flat to show him videos of Rudolf Nureyev's performances in the West and urge him to watch how his fellow Tartar expressed character and mood through every step... These sessions were conducted in secrecy, usually with the curtains drawn, as Nureyev was at that time officially reviled in the Soviet Union, condemned as a traitor to his homeland.' Significantly, Mukhamedov noted that Naum's manner 'was both gentle and implacable; he would rarely raise his voice, but he would never give up.' This gentleness and implacability comes up again and again, like a family resemblance, among the great Messerer teachers of ballet: Asaf, Sulamif, the Plisetsky brothers Alexander and Azary, Naum Azarin-Messerer and Mikhail Messerer.

By the terrible time of war, Asaf and Sulamif were renowned and mature principals inside the Bolshoi Ballet. The

Sulamif  
Messerer  
teaching  
*The Dying  
Swan* to  
her 13-  
year-old  
niece Maya  
Plisetskaya

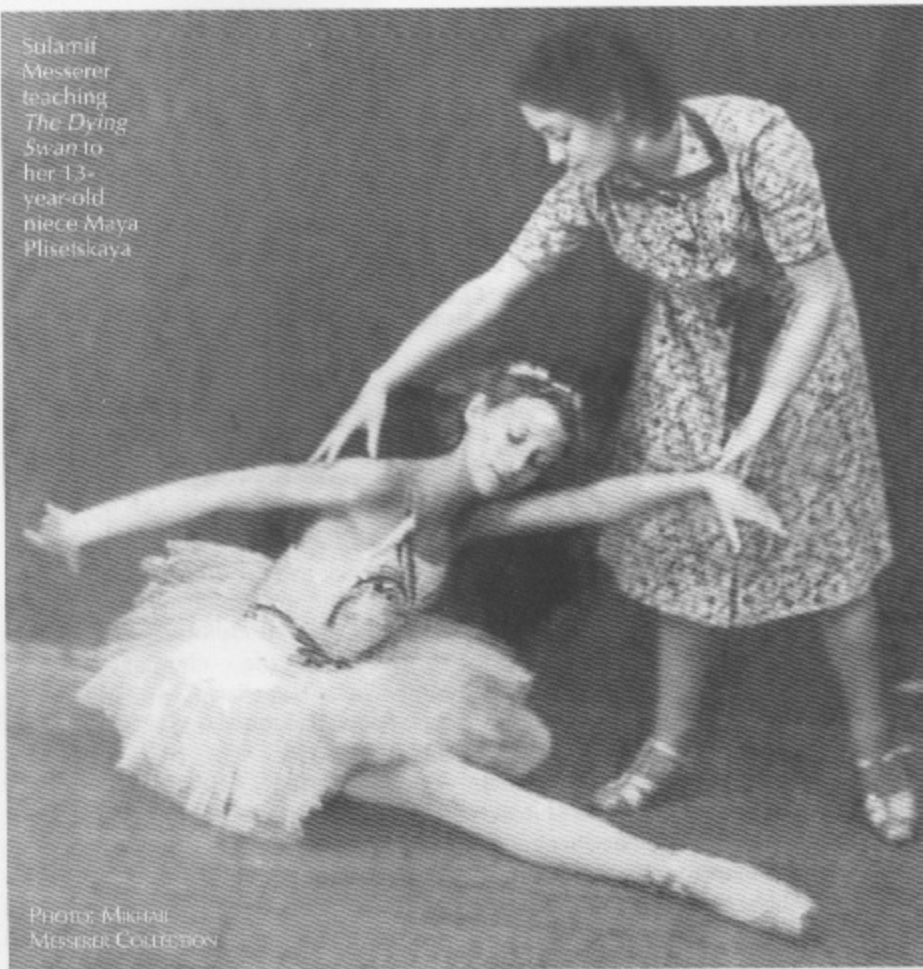


PHOTO: MIGDAL  
MESSERER COLLECTION

brother and sister duo had become a highly rated partnership, so much so that Stalin allowed them to dance in Europe in 1933. Significantly, both began to teach class in the Bolshoi when only in their twenties, Asaf passing on the secrets of his exceptional virtuosity, while Sulamif was teaching at the Bolshoi school to, among others, her sister Rakhil's daughter, the young Maya Plisetskaya.

The tragedy of the Plisetsky family is told by Maya herself in her magnetic, partisan autobiography. Rakhil (1901-93) was to see her family suffer bitterly for her falling in love with the wrong man. Gen-

tle, beautiful and black-haired, she looked like an ancient Persian miniature and became a well-known silent-movie actress, until she met a clever and idealistic engineer. Mikhail Plisetsky had connections that would destroy him in Stalinist Russia. First, he had an elder brother who had gone to America as a teenager in the dying days of White Russia. Maybe more significant in his downfall was Plisetsky's link to Stalin's rival Trotsky.

Maya describes her father as 'an honest Communist', and 'one of the Don Quixotes of that wild year'. In 1918, as a 17-year-old, he had felt his blood rise with excite-

ment in the immediate aftermath of the Workers' Revolution, believing in its stated ambitions of brotherly love and human equality. He did well, became chief of the coal-mining industry in the Arctic circle posted to Spitzbergen, Norway, where little Maya honed her skiing in one of the coldest places on earth. In Spitzbergen Plisetsky unselfishly advanced the career of a friend who had once worked for Trotsky. The association destroyed them both - Plisetsky was arrested in 1937 and disappeared. Not until after the fall of the Soviet Union did the family find out the full details of his torture and death.

That his wife, Rakhil, had just borne their third child, Azary, did not prevent her being arrested too, and condemned to eight years in prison with her infant. Maya was 12 then, a new student at the Bolshoi Ballet School, where the frightened family prayed that her relationship to the great Asaf and Sulamif would protect her. Plisetskaya's riveting memoir uncovers some unhappy fall-out inside the family from these awful days. Her portraits of her relations are keen, direct, sometimes acid, in particular her account of her relationship with her aunt, Sulamif, who almost certainly saved her life and enabled her career to begin. 'My relationship with her is the most complicated,' writes Maya. 'I lived at Mita's after Mother was imprisoned. And I adored her. No less than my mother, and sometimes it seemed even more.' But obligation and gratitude can poison even the closest family relations, and so it appears here.

Sulamif (1908-2004) was a woman of phenomenal spirit. Her life-story is astounding. She was simultaneously an Olympic swimmer for the USSR and a leading Bolshoi ballerina. From 1927 to 1930 she was the Soviet record-holder for the 100 metres crawl, even as she was being acclaimed as a brilliant new Kitri in *Don Quixote* and Zarema in *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. Sulamif was cut of heroic

cloth, feisty in her choices. She would sweet-talk the KGB into permitting impermissible things, and at 39 she married a stunt motorcyclist and had her only child Mikhail, at 40. She was one of the Soviet Union's cultural treasures, a Stalin Prize winner and People's Artist, and when she was 72 and ill, she packed a small bag in Japan, where she had been teaching, and went to the American Embassy to seek asylum.

But most of that lay ahead when Sulamif found herself using all her imagination and influence to save her sister's family from degradation and worse. The Plisetskys were political dead meat as far as the authorities were concerned, and it took Sulamif's efforts to keep Maya from disappearing into an orphanage for children of enemies of the people. (Maya quotes in her book the jawdropping statistic that 97 per cent of her countrymen born in 1923, two years before her, died or went missing in the war.) She tried to comfort her niece by sending postcards that pretended to be from her mother. She travelled in a prisoner convoy across Russia for days to find Rakhil's Siberian concentration camp where 6,000 'criminal' women were incarcerated. She got Rakhil moved to a slightly less lethal jail in Kazakhstan where Maya could go and see her and her baby brother, and Sulamif arranged for her to be sent home in three years rather than the eight of her sentence.

While Sulamif was housing Maya, Asaf was housing Maya's middle brother Alik (Alexander), of similar age to his own son Boris. Maya asks herself in her book: 'wonder if I exaggerate the drama of my family? Whether I'm overdoing the shades of black in my narrative? But it all happened. It's all true. That's how we lived. And suffered. It left scars on my heart... This is how my generation lived. I am its child. No better, no worse.'

Sulamif and  
Asaf Messerer  
in Lopukhov's  
*The Bright  
Stream*, 1935



PHOTO: MICHAEL  
MESSERER COLLECTION

Maya fought her way to the top of the Bolshoi against fantastic odds – as a Jew with a traitorous father, she was denied a place on the Bolshoi Ballet's iconic debut tour to London in 1956, even though at 31 she was at the height of her powers, the Bolshoi's fiery whirlwind, against the much older Galina Ulanova's exquisite night breeze. They were paired as ultimate contrasts: in *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* as Maria and Zarema (there is a thrilling film record of this), or as Giselle and Myrthe. Plisetskaya, for all her frustration that she was being forced to play second fiddle for political reasons, describes her rival's art with awed tenderness in her book.

When Ulanova retired, and Plisetskaya was finally acknowledged as the Bolshoi's prima ballerina, she had little time to enjoy it before her nemesis Yuri Grigorovich arrived in 1964. From then on she was to carve out her own career inside the Bolshoi, in constant opposition to Grigorovich, using her star status to form her own sub-group and create her own ballets. Grigorovich viewed Asaf's class as a nest of enemies, and forbade his heroic young muses to join it. Young Vladimir Vasiliev, though given superstar stature by Grigorovich, stayed defiantly with Asaf, and didn't care what that said to Grigorovich. When Alexander Godunov agreed to partner Plisetskaya in *Anna Karenina*, his Bolshoi career nosedived, leading to his defection. Irek Mukhamedov, too, though trained by Asaf's nephew, Naum, was warned by Grigorovich on his arrival at the company not to attend Asaf's class: 'Messerer's class has the atmosphere of a supermarket. He is not really serious about dance.'

Meanwhile Maya's two brothers, Alik and Azary, were also Bolshoi dancers and burgeoning teachers, and Azary, a decent young soloist, was about to open a fascinating new chapter. In 1961, advertising the recent Cuban Communist revolution,

Alicia Alonso brought her new Ballet Nacional de Cuba on tour to Russia. (Incidentally, Mikhail Baryshnikov, then aged 12, saw Balanchine's *Apollo* for the first time, as danced by the Cubans in Latvia, on this tour.) The Soviet government was by now looking abroad to generate new cultural relations with its political friends; Sulamif Messerer had been invited to Tokyo in 1961 to establish a Russian ballet school (from which would emerge the Tokyo Ballet); and in 1963 Azary Plisetsky, who had partnered Alonso to her approval on her Russian tour, was sent to Cuba as her partner and to help train her new national school.

Alonso's long-time partner Igor Youskevich had just retired, and into Azary's kind and Asaf-trained hands passed the responsibility of ensuring that Cuba's magnificent ballerina, who could see almost nothing, would look her best. They filmed *Giselle* together. Azary married one of her young stars, Loipa Araujo, one of the brilliant Cuban girls who began creaming off the top medals at Varna in the mid-1960s. In 1966 the Cuban troupe returned to Moscow, under the direction of Alicia's brother-in-law Alberto Alonso, and naturally Maya went to see the results of her brother's teaching. Struck by Alberto's choreography, and frustrated by her uphill struggle under the new Grigorovich regime, she hatched a plan with her husband, the leading composer Rodion Shchedrin, and Alonso to create a ballet for her, *Carmen Suite*. It would be a family affair, designed by her cousin Boris Messerer, who was a noted and innovative talent in Moscow's art world.

The ballet was in fact a star vehicle for two prima ballerinas: Maya premiered it in spring 1967 in Moscow, Alicia did it that autumn in Havana, with Maya's brother as her José. Maya had to win a great battle to perform *Carmen Suite* against opposi-

tion from Bolshoi and government authorities over its apparent indecency and individualism. But with Shostakovich backing Shchedrin's music, Maya won. 'I danced *Carmen Suite* about 350 times, 132 times at the Bolshoi alone. I've danced it all over the world.'

Azary, partnering a no less charismatic ballerina in Alicia Alonso, would be credited by Alicia's husband, Fernando Alonso, as the formative influence on the

entire Cuban ballet 'school', creating an emphasis on courteous partnering that sat marvellously with the natural Cuban tendency towards macho exhibitionism. Jorge Esquivel, Lazaro Carreño, Andres Williams – the onrush of splendid Cuban men was rapid, for which Azary must take immense credit. (When today some say that in male dancing Cuba is the new Russia, they may be closer to the truth than they know.)

After a decade in Havana he went to

Europe, settling with Maurice Béjart, a long-standing friend of all the Messerer/Plistesksys. Increasingly he is invited to New York. The American critic Joan Acocella watched 70-year-old Azary recently giving a masterclass to such dancers as David Hallberg and Veronika Pärt at Baryshnikov's new centre: 'Plisetsky worked on tiny details. He quoted his uncle Asaf Messerer, another celebrated teacher: "The most expressive part of the body of a dancer is the hand." He took the students carefully through the configuration of the fingers during a plié: one design, palms down, as they were going down, and another, palms up, as they were coming up. As is often the case with master teachers, Plisetsky performed the step more beautifully than any of his students.'

Earlier this year Mikhail Baryshnikov fulfilled a long-held ambition, to visit Havana and watch the Cuban school that Azary had refined – a school which he said he now regarded as on a par with the French and Russian schools.

While Azary was colonising Cuba for the Messerers, Sulamif, his aunt, was colonising Japan. It was a link that would lead to her defection.

Sulamif was a success as a witty, vivid personality on stage and authoritative teacher behind it. When she met Grigory Levitin in Gorky Park, where he was performing a Wall-of-Death motorcycle stunt, two unusual, dynamic people seemed set for happiness. A year after they married, Misha (named after his late grandfather) was born. However, there would be no let-up in the apocalyptic events that continued to befall the family. Misha tells the story: 'My father passed away when I was 17. He had a crash. One of his students made an attempt on his life, did something to his wheels. An investigation found that both tyres had been tampered with. One could have been acci-

dental; two was too much for chance. His student, whom he treated like a second son, and I knew like a brother, had done this in order to take the act away from my father. My father was performing his circus act in Gorky Park, inside a giant barrel – the audience stood above and looked down into it. He died not long after the crash, weakened by his injuries and by a desperate sense of betrayal. The act was given to the student. Nothing could be proven.'

It was dreadful for him, Misha says, but even worse for his half-sister, Irina Levitina, a dancer in the Bolshoi, who now had no parents. 'I still had my mother.' It also now made sense to stress the connection with his mother's illustrious family, and Mikhail Levitin became Mikhail Levitin-Messerer. At 19 he was accepted into the Bolshoi corps de ballet, but Grigorovich's big hunky ballets were not Misha's style. The vast Bolshoi Ballet could spare a few of its underemployed soloists, and Misha would guest with Perm Ballet partnering the gleaming new teenage discovery Galina Panova (then Ragozina), dancing *The Sleeping Beauty* in Perm with her and later with the lovely Lyubov Kunakova. 'Then I went to the Kirov to dance *Fountain of Bakhchisarai* with Elena Evteyeva. I was happy NOT to be working in the Bolshoi, actually.'

While dancing, he was also studying on a five-year course to become a ballet teacher. 'I took Asaf's class in the Bolshoi for ten years and he was my main influence, but I knew I wanted to be a teacher from my teens. When I was at the Bolshoi school, sometimes our teacher Alexander Rudenko didn't come to class. Most of the boys would go to the courtyard to play football if the teacher didn't turn up, but two or three would stay and I would give the class instead. I knew, even very young, that I could give a class that dancers liked.'

By the late 1970s Misha was 30 and wanted to take the next step to teach full-

time. He could not have dreamed the step would be so drastic. In 1980 he was a soloist on a Bolshoi Ballet tour to Japan. His mother was already there, guest-teaching in Tokyo, as she had for almost 20 years, but she was 72 and her contract was ending. She was taken ill and rang her son from hospital.

'She had asked the authorities to let her stay a few days to recuperate, but the Soviet Embassy told her no, she would be fine to fly. She got very annoyed. It reminded her yet again of USSR attitudes, a system that had put her sister in a cattle-truck and tried to put Maya into an orphanage. My mother rang me at our hotel in Nagoya. I knew it was serious. It was late in the evening but I just put my toothbrush and a few things in a small plastic bag and went downstairs to go to the station. Downstairs sure enough I met the Bolshoi KGB minder.' Misha improvised that he was taking empty milk bottles back to the grocery – a tiny source of income permitted to dancers on tour. The ruse worked, and he made it onto a late Tokyo train.

'They would not notice my absence in our hotel in Nagoya until the morning – people often stayed in each other's rooms all night. I went to my mother, who had left the hospital to go to her hotel, as she was expected to leave for Moscow early the next morning. We talked the rest of the night, and when dawn came, and we had no more time for pros and cons, we said, it's time for action. At six in the morning we went to the American Embassy.'

They knew what they were risking. The Bolshoi Ballet was by now being battered by defections: the previous August, on the New York tour, Alexander Godunov had defected, followed a month later in Los Angeles by Leonid and Valentina Kozlov. At a mass company meeting back home, Misha recalls, 'Grigorovich said these people will fall as low in their artistic lives as their predeces-

sors Nureyev and Makarova. And people shouted, "Yes!" Good members of the Communist Party. I was not political, but the invasion of Afghanistan had also just happened, and little by little you found you couldn't take certain things any more, how people had to lie about each other's behaviour in order to survive.'

The Soviets were far more concerned about losing Sulamif than Misha or even the charismatic Godunov. She was a veteran Bolshoi figurehead, a prima ballerina and renowned teacher, a laureate of state prizes. Coming only a few years after the departure of Rostropovich and the Bolshoi Opera star Galina Vishnevskaya, Sulamif's defection was another high-profile blow to the state.

Mother and son were given a tough KGB grilling by Soviet officers – Misha, frightened after the Georgy Markov poisoned umbrella murder in London a year earlier, insisted on a very long table for the interview. The pair stood their ground; the Japanese, fearful of upsetting the Soviets further, ordered them to buy their own tickets to New York. They arrived with \$800 to start their new life.

News had gone before them and they were met by their American relatives, the Plesents, children of Maya's emigrant Plisetsky uncle. Sulamif and Misha were at once asked to teach at the New York Conservatory of Dance, run by a former Ballets Russes dancer Vladimir Dokoudovsky, and invitations began to flood in from all over America. 'Then my mother was teaching at ABT, and Anton Dolin came to see her class. He knew her from Tokyo, and he told her, "Now you're a free person, why not come to England?" Three weeks later we received the invitation to go to London from Leonie Urdang.'

On their return journey from staging *La Bayadère* for Japanese and Chinese companies, the pair stopped in London and did a week's teaching at the Urdang Academy. Peter Wright watched one of Sulamif's

classes and told her that London needed them. Her vivid, exact classes would number Nureyev, Makarova, Sibley and Guillem among her students. Before long, her son faced the most important audition of his teaching career, taking a Royal Ballet boys' class, in front of Ninette de Valois, Frederick Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan and Norman Morrice.

Wright was right – as Misha says, the Royal Ballet gave him a strange sense of coming home. 'When I first saw Ninette de Valois, I realised her teaching was of things I'd almost forgotten, things forgotten in Russia, what my "old" teachers had taught me – she of course learned this style from Diaghilev's ballet masters. But unfortunately there was no fertile ground for that under Grigorovich. Nobody needed proper fifth positions or proper shoes, dancers wouldn't go to class, clean line was not important. Even in Grigorovich's *Swan Lake*, let alone *Spartacus*, the boys in Act I were in boots, not in ballet shoes. The way of teaching tendu by Elizaveta Gerdt, who had taught my mother, coup de pied position, things like that, I observed, were being carefully taught in England.'

London is now Misha's home with his wife Olga Sabadoch, a former Stanislavsky Ballet dancer, now of the Royal Opera House, her very tall, willowy figure regularly seen dancing in operas or doing 'walking' roles in ballet (you can hardly fail to notice her exquisite curtsey when she is the Nurse in *The Sleeping Beauty*). They have a little girl, Michelle. Misha teaches his classes worldwide, with the Royal Ballet, Kirov, Bolshoi, Paris Opera, Australian and American Ballet Theatre among his clients. His style is not Vaganova's, which is a Soviet-era modernisation and anthologising of the Russian Imperial style. What he teaches he learned from Asaf, the 'old' Bolshoi classicism, but he adds in the best characteristics of classes he sees all over the world. Permanent attachment has never ap-

pealed to him – his engagements enable him to work with the Royal Ballet, or individually with a competition hopeful, with a Sylvie Guillem tour, or staging his uncle's popular *Class Concert* somewhere.

Misha believed it impossible he would ever teach again in his homeland. In London in the mid-1980s he had been visited by the KGB and told he'd be taken back to Moscow in the trunk of a car if he did not return voluntarily. Even after perestroika, his old enemies had not forgiven or forgotten. When he went backstage to greet Bolshoi friends on their Albert Hall tour in 1993, Grigorovich tried to order him off the premises. A year later, though, he nervously accepted a teaching engagement from Dmitri Briantsev, chief of the Moscow Stanislavsky Ballet (a trip on which he met his future wife). In 2003 he returned in the safer embrace of a Royal Ballet tour to Russia, where his classes attracted numbers of curious Kirov and Bolshoi dancers. Next Makhar Vaziev asked him to teach at the Kirov. Finally, at the Messerers' home theatre they found a friend in the new director Alexei Ratmansky. Calling in Boris to design his 2003 production of *The Bright Stream*, and Misha to stage Asaf's long-neglected *Class Concert* in 2007, Ratmansky has put the Messerer family name back in active business at the Bolshoi, allowing a long-ignorant public and new generations of dancers to relish the lyrical clarity and virtuosic challenge of the Messerer way of dancing.

For Misha it is a powerful and emotional experience to be teaching in Russia. 'Not even in my wildest dreams did I think I would teach there – unless it was a nightmare, and I was put in front of the firing squad. But the experience was great fun, actually. It's a great honour and recognition, as they have their own great teachers, and for them to have a Russian teacher from abroad as a guest tells me I'm not that bad.'

Old scars remain, though. Even only

two years ago he was uncomfortably reminded so. While the Bolshoi was in London for the summer the dancers were doing class in the Opera House. In a nearby studio, Messerer was taking a class. Dancers began to move from the Bolshoi class to his; the senior ballerina leading the emptying lesson, he says, was shouting how dare they go to a defector's class? This year, once again, as Misha taught *Class Concert* in Moscow, again there were cries from the wings of 'Defector!'

The years following the defection had been hard for the family back at home. It had been half-expected and yet feared by Rakhil, to whom Misha had become very close. Reprisals followed: Asaf, though senior pedagogue, was told he could no longer accompany Bolshoi tours. His son, the designer Boris, was getting into hot water for publishing a dissident cultural almanac *Metropol*. There were more tangible emotional blows in the early deaths of two of the grandchildren, the teachers Alexander Plisetsky and Naum Azarin, both only

in their fifties. Most of the younger generation was now gone or out of reach. Asaf died in 1992, Rakhil in 1993.

Sulamif, of course, survived indomitably. To her Soviet awards and Emperor Akihito's Order of the Sacred Treasure (Gold Rays), she added the OBE in 2000 for her services to British dance teaching. She was still giving class at Béjart's company in her 95th year – and still regularly swimming – just before she died three years ago.

Today the youngest brother, Aminadav, known as Alexander, is the last survivor of the dentist's children, a spry, kind-hearted and much loved former engineer whose ninetieth birthday last year was attended by a host of Messerers and Plisetskys in Moscow. Several little Messerer girls in London and Moscow are taking ballet classes. Whether they go on to professional glory or not, their artistic siblings, the students of various Messerers worldwide, ensure the long continuation of a tremendous artistic bloodline. ●



Mikhail Messerer teaching at the Bolshoi

PHOTO: MISHA MESSERER COLLECTION