

Made of Air

Johan Kobborg's staging of *La Sylphide* in Russia is seen by Ismene Brown

Considering her history as the engine-room of the grandest spectacles in nineteenth and twentieth-century ballet, Russia has a surprising susceptibility to Sylphides. For half a century, like the rest of the ballet world, she was in thrall to the iconic French *Sylphide* given stage wings by the extraordinary Marie Taglioni. After her sensational impact in her father's ballet *La Sylphide* at the Paris Opera in 1832, Taglioni spent five years from 1837 to 1842 as star ballerina in St Petersburg. Dancers there lapped up this exemplar of a revolutionary approach to ballet, that of the insubstantial, poetic reverie.

Expectations of ballet changed in a trice thanks to *La Sylphide*, but in its indelible identification with Taglioni lay the ballet's fragility, and after she retired it dropped away. In Russia in 1892, some 45 years after Taglioni's retirement, Marius Petipa revised and embellished the legendary ballet, as he had with *Giselle* in 1884, but his public was now reeling from the bravura and opulence of his *Sleeping Beauty* and *La Sylphide* disappointed. In 1925 a Russian *Sylphide* fluttered one more time in the new USSR, as a short-lived star vehicle created for themselves by the Bolshoi's husband-and-wife star couple Vasily Tikhomirov and Ekaterina Geltzer, both edging 50. Then, perhaps gratefully, the *Sylphide* vanished from Russian soil for half a century.

Bournonville's rival version, meanwhile, had survived rather better, thanks to its firm preservation by the Royal Danish Ballet of their masterpiece, and not least because it was not over-identified with a single dancer. Pre-*Sylphide*, in the late 1820s, August Bournonville had been Taglioni's regular partner at the Paris Opera. Of the same age, he was a worshipper,

as he wrote in his letters, of her 'pure, gracious and poetic' style, 'a young lady of good family' giving 'a lesson in good taste' to a rickety theatre art.

When still only 25, he returned to Copenhagen as the new director, choreographer and star dancer of the Royal Danish Ballet, but revisiting Paris to see his dear Marie premiere *La Sylphide*, he took a slightly different view from the public fascinated only by this luminous ballerina. He saw in James a fabulous male role as well. He bought Filippo Taglioni's scenario, intending to stage it, with modifications, in Copenhagen for himself and his best pupil, the 17-year-old Lucile Grahn. Happily, the Paris Opera wanted too much for Jean Schneitzhoffer's attractive score, and Bournonville turned to a cheaper, but more original option. He commissioned a 20-year-old Norwegian pianist-composer, Herman von Løvenskjold, to write a new score, which hence stimulated Bournonville to make a significantly different ballet from Taglioni's – but one that, for most of the nineteenth century, remained in eclipse beneath the French one (some Parisians always denounced Bournonville as a plagiarist).

By the turbulent start of the twentieth century, *La Sylphide* had launched a genre that had eclipsed her in turn: *Giselle*, *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*, almost every ballet had a ballet blanc, and the arrival of Fokine's *Les Sylphides* left nothing else for the old *Sylphide* to say. Cyril Beaumont does not even mention Bournonville's in his *Complete Book of Ballets* published in 1937, which hails Taglioni alone. In Ashton, Britain had its own master of petit point embroidery and fairies – indeed Ashton, fascinated by the Taglioni legend, twice toyed with the idea of making his



Natalia Osipova as the Sylphide

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own *Sylphide*, with Rambert in the late 1920s and with de Valois in the late 1940s just before he choreographed *Sylvia*. Marie Rambert pursued the vision, and on finding the Taglioni version no longer possible to stage, asked Sweden's leading ballerina and Bournonville specialist, Elsa-Marianne von

Rosen, to stage (and star in) the Danish version for Rambert in 1960. 'When we had to do away with our corps de ballet, I mourned the loss of our *La Sylphide*, which I love passionately, more than almost any other ballet in our repertoire,' wrote Rambert in her memoir *Quicksilver*.

It was the brilliance of the Danish dancers that brought *La Sylphide* back to world renown. Though the flying effects and dance technique looked anachronistic, the Bournonville had acquired by default from the Taglioni the status of being the earliest romantic ballet in the canon. And as Bournonville had intended, the role of James had taken on a catalytic effect: the Danes treated it like *Hamlet*. It was Russia's realisation that outside its borders the greatest male dancing in the world was coming consistently out of Denmark – and out of the role of James – that made the Royal Danish Ballet's tour to the USSR in the early 1970s significant. Oleg Vinogradov, then ballet master of Leningrad's Maly Theatre, fell in love with Bournonville, and hired von Rosen to stage the first Russian production of his *La Sylphide* for the Maly Ballet in 1975. This was the basis for Vinogradov's own production for the Bolshoi in 1994 (Nadezhda Gracheva and Sergei Filin danced the original leads).

Naturally, the Bolshoi dancers, trained by Grigorovich, danced it Bolshoi-style. By 2007, this late-flowering Russian passion for the *Sylphide*, in sum, had a devoted public, but in its transfer to the Bolshoi's vast stage had picked up much of the big-scale wallop favoured by Grigorovich, which had little to do with the dainty precision of the Danish style. This grieved the Bolshoi's current director, Alexei Ratmansky, who had spent his dancing career in the Royal Danish Ballet and knew exactly how wrong it was.

He had to tread deftly to find the right new producer – both Grigorovich and Vinogradov supporters would be quick to find fault – but in the Royal Ballet's Danish star Johan Kobborg, newcomer as he was to staging, Ratmansky showed astute judgment. Kobborg has long been a favourite with Moscow balletomanes for his exquisitely finished dancing and compelling dramatic talent, usually guesting with

Alina Cojocaru, the Russians' favourite foreign ballerina. He had brought *La Sylphide* to the Royal Ballet in 2005 to acclaim, with much assistance from the Royal Danish Ballet. Kobborg knew, when he arrived in Moscow, that he would need all the goodwill he had earned as a dancer, in what he needed to do as stager – this time he would be entirely on his own, coaching every part.

'I had to de-Bolshoi it,' he told me when we met in Moscow just after the premiere. 'Bournonville is about simplicity and modesty, it's almost humble. It is much more about holding the pose in the air, where Bolshoi style is more about travelling. I did spend quite a lot of time explaining *why* I wanted them to do less – some of them took a bit of convincing.'

His programme notes for the Bolshoi production, which premiered on 20 February in the New Stage (the Sadler's Wells-sized theatre alongside the still-under-refurbishment Main Stage), is headed, instructively, '*La Sylphide* through the eyes of James no. 29'. In Kobborg's words: 'It is the Royal Danish Ballet tradition to hand a part down from one artist to the next. When I looked at the list of Jameses, I realised I was either number 29 or 31, while the first name on the list was that of August Bournonville himself!'

This solid authenticity carried a great deal of weight with Bolshoi artists in dealing with the changes he wanted. He found the Bolshoi dancers easily capable of switching from 'big' to 'small', from sweeping to precise, and the men in both performances I saw showed scissor-sharp footbeats with admirable bounce and verve. If I'd thought Moscow dancers might look down on 'little' Bournonville, I was entirely mistaken.

In fact, it was the casting that proved much the most controversial aspect of this production. Kobborg did not go for the established stars associated with the previous Vinogradov production or with re-



Ekaterina Krysanova and Jan Godowsky

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ceived views on lordly heroes and filigree sylphs. He cast fresh, young faces who would be more open to his changes perhaps. His first pairing of Natalia Osipova and the young soloist Vyacheslav Lopatin struck watchers as either a stroke of genius or bafflingly inappropriate. Lopatin, short, fast, a passionate modern adolescent, seemed to me a marvellous choice – very Kobborgian – but it alienated critics expecting a statuesque James in the mould of Nikolai Tsiskaridze or Erik Bruhn. Osipova seemed to me, as an English watcher, an obvious choice as the Sylph for her captivating qualities of lightness, character, charm and sheer modern independence, but the willowy stereotype of a sylph dies hard in Russia.

After the premiere Osipova told me that she knew some people would always only pigeonhole her as Kitri in *Don Quixote*, 'due to certain stereotypes of how ballerinas should look – but we must crash the stereotypes when we can'.

Ekaterina Krysanova, the second-night *Sylphide*, while physically more delicate than Osipova, had also been amazed to be cast, her most prominent role of Gamzatti (*La Bayadère*) suggesting that she wasn't thought of in Moscow as a sylph-type either. But they both told me that being chosen and coached by Kobborg in the role had made them passionate about the role, dying to dance it again, and they felt the experience had significantly changed in how they were perceived and the roles they might be offered in the future.

How is Kobborg regarded by the Bolshoi? Krysanova, 23, replied, 'The company loved him right away, not only as a dancer but as a human being. Even when people can't have direct communication with him, not speaking his language, he is such an open man, and he wants to give so much, as much as he can to the acting. Dancing the *Sylphide* has changed me as a ballet dancer, and this is really thanks to Johan. He opened my eyes

to many things, mainly that we should be live creatures, live people on stage. It's not that technique became secondary, because of course I've paid great attention to that—but the main thing to me is dance, and the main thing in dance of this period is soul, and the presence of that on stage at that moment. I am now going to rethink the way I dance all my roles.'

Osipova, 22, told me, 'I did have high hopes that Johan would make it contemporary, in a sense. But I wasn't expecting him to give us such freedom in our interpretations. Johan is such a clever man that he helped me to search and find my own way, he wasn't pushing us to be these unearthly creatures. He said here is James and you are his dream. You are the embodiment of what he dreams of. So you can be totally different, very feminine and very desirable from James's point of view. In a certain sense, she is playing with him, because she was probably with him all his life from his childhood, but she chose to turn up on his wedding day! So I'm sure she came with bad intentions! But at the same time she is a fairy and she doesn't understand how serious the results can be.'

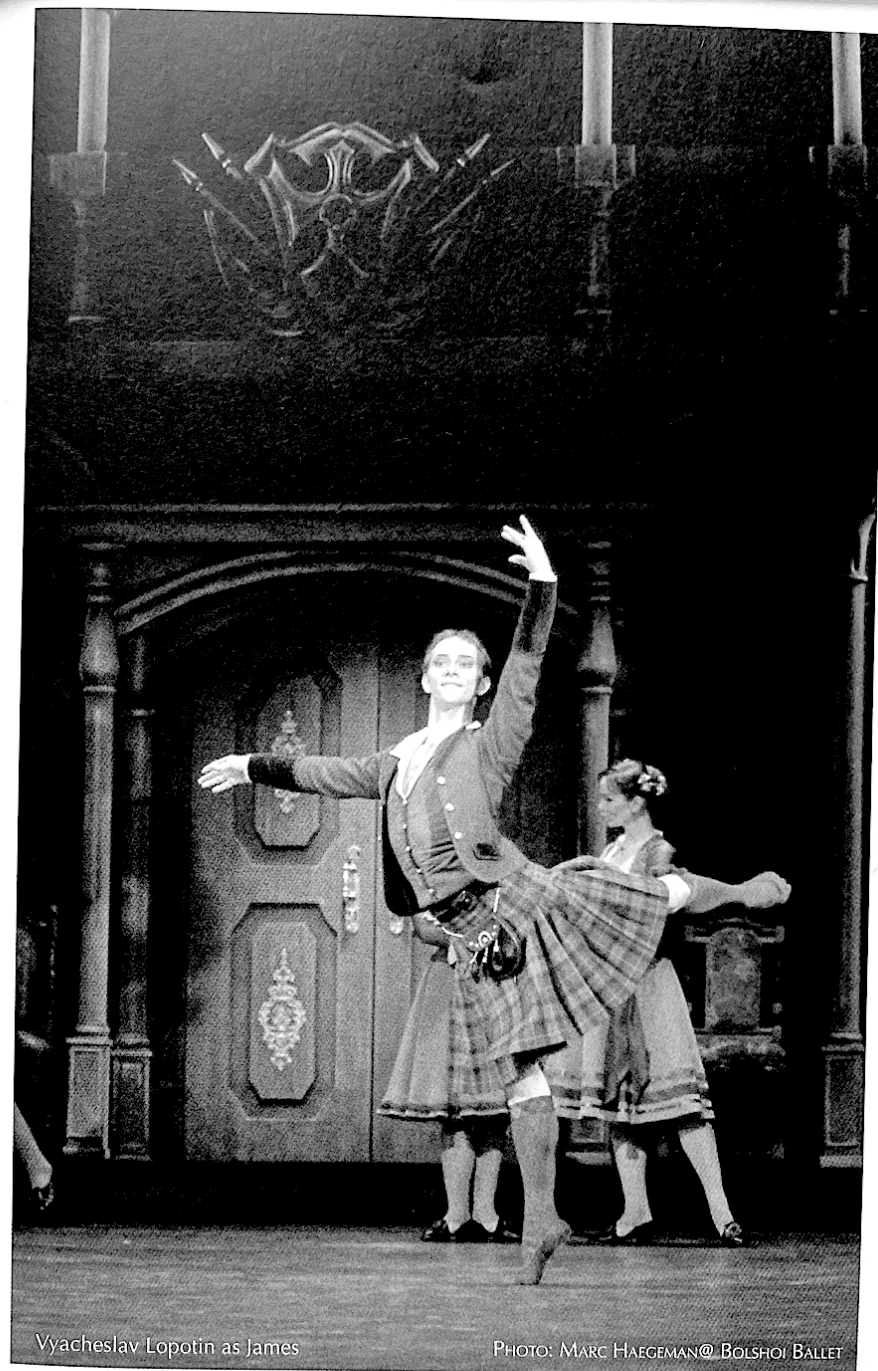
It cannot surprise anyone who follows Kobborg's brilliant Royal Ballet performances, with their unique chiaroscuro of light feet and dark soul, that he was intent on both cleaning up the steps and in bringing a new, modern psychological plausibility to these fairytale characters. Although the story hinges on the Sylphide being untouchable, the original production had James and the Sylphide 'constantly kissing each other', says Kobborg. As Bournonville was James, and his delectable teenage protégée Grahn was the Sylph, this arouses distracting questions. Indeed, a year after the 1836 *La Sylphide* premiere, Grahn gratefully left Denmark for the Paris Opera Ballet 'to escape Bournonville's attentions', according to Horst Koegler's *Oxford Dictionary of Dance*.

This may explain original features of the production. After Grahn's departure, a ballerina performing the Sylphide bravely remarked to Bournonville that it was inconsistent for her to kiss James throughout the performance if she was going to die when he embraced her at the end. Bournonville agreed, and stopped the kissing.

This detail is fascinating. Not only does it distance Bournonville's intentions decidedly from the purity and chasteness he had so loved in Taglioni, but it shows that he and his audience had no concern with logic. It is a window onto the ready suspension of disbelief that ballet audiences were capable of in those days, their willingness not to be distracted by plot implausibility, their pleasure in ballet as a wholly surprising art of illusions and effects whose rules were only concerned with theatrical surprise. Reality was redundant in such a theatre-art of marvels and tricks. You might as well ask for slapstick comedy to be motivationally realistic, perhaps.

Nevertheless, Kobborg is surely justified in thinking that it is only by fitting the inherent drama of this story into today's mindset that *La Sylphide* can make a successful trip into a world 170 years later, where reality is all around us. He takes the no-touch rule to its purest end in the choreography, but encourages the late twentieth-century character change in the Sylphide herself, less the chaste, ethereal vision, and more the capricious sprite, teasing and erotic, the vision of a lad in the full blood of his youth.

The fresh energy of Kobborg's Bolshoi production was signalled by the first notes from the pit on opening night. Conducted eagerly by Pavel Klinichev, who also prepared the score to Kobborg's specifications, the overture sparkled with vivacity and relish from the players, highlighting how expertly (for all



Vyacheslav Lopotin as James

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his youth) Lovenskjold ranged from sombre tragedy to bubbliest happiness in his themes.

Peter Farmer, the leading British ballet designer, has provided a beautifully traditional setting: very grand baronial hall – James is clearly from prosperous landed gentry – and the loveliest, most translucent wood I have ever seen, soft layers of evening light through trees, wonderful. The men's kilts swirl well and they have bright socks, so you can admire their footwork. I was disappointed by the Act I girls' dresses, not tartan but in plain shades of beige and dun, with waistcoats and little brown school shoes. This is not a Highland wedding on the scale of Madonna and Guy Ritchie – Effie here does get a

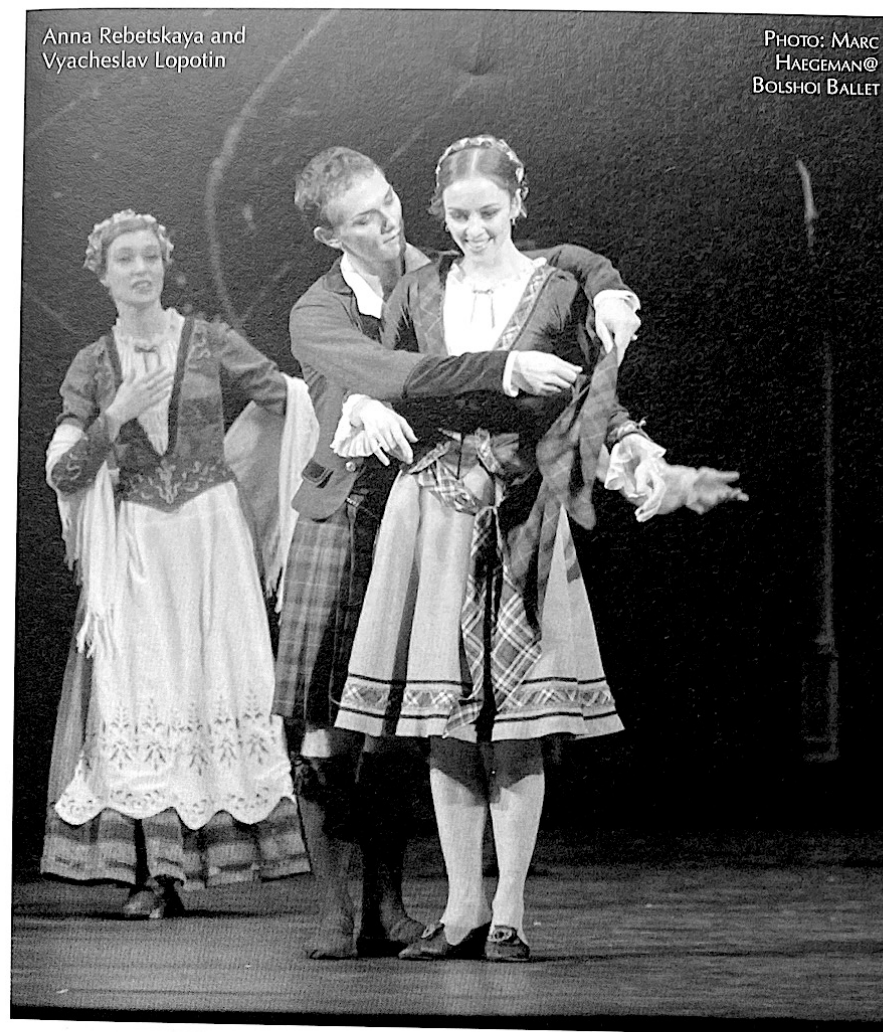
proper ivory silk wedding dress, rather than simply a veil as in London, but it's only short.

However the sylphs' dresses are simply ravishing – 'made of air', according to Farmer in his press conference. I was enchanted by the dual message: from the front the exceptionally soft white dresses were sprinkled with rosebuds, as in the famous Taglioni engravings, yet the back of them seemed to be phosphorescent, unreal, cunningly sequined, with miraculously fragile, transparent flies' wings. These dresses illustrate how duplicitous Sylphides are, how dangerous to humans, of deceptive resemblance to real girls, but actually will-o'-the-wisps with their own rules.



Gennady Yannin,
Anna Leonova and
Jan Godovsky

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Anna Rebetkaya and
Vyacheslav Lopotin

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This Tinkerbell wilfulness was precisely what I loved in Osipova's performance, while Krysanova seemed to be feeling her way tentatively towards a more Taglionesque archetype. The familiar opening scene with James sleeping in his wing chair, the Sylphide kneeling by him, contemplating him, registered slightly differently in each of the first two casts, proving Kobborg's hard and exacting work. Lopotin and Osipova aroused an instant

expectation of passionate individuals, Krysanova and Yan Godovsky formed a more delicate, traditional etched opening tableau.

In Osipova's interpretation I saw an echo of Andersen's Little Mermaid, another lovelorn supernatural who flirts fatally with the human world. Osipova's feet really do seem to trip the light fantastic, so buoyant is she, a natural gift. The pivotal moment in Act I at the pre-wedding party

where she bounds through the room, luring James to abandon it all and follow her, was astounding – Osipova flew across the stage like a streak of light, to a thunder of amazed applause from the audience, where Krysanova's lovely arrow-straight jetés the following night drew no reaction, since she had not quite seized the dramatic moment.

I asked Osipova later about these soaring arc-shaped jumps (incredible, coming within a couple of days of her sneakers-and-joggers flingings-about in Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*). She answered: 'I think in each role your jump should be different. So in *Don Q* it's like a crazy, explosive jump – in *Giselle* it's totally different, like flying, full of desire, but at the same time there is pain in the jump. And here in *Sylphide* it should be very airy, very light, and nobody in the auditorium should be able to see how I'm taking off and how my feet are landing.' I said I noticed her premiere shoes looked ropey. She admitted, 'I prepared my shoes a long time to be very very soft. I found I would either have to choose beautiful shoes or ones that made no sound – and I had to choose the quiet ones. But one of these days I hope I will find some beautiful ones that are soundless too. It would be a disaster for the *Sylphide* to make a noise when she lands.

'Technically I had to work very hard on every single thing. I've never danced a role with so much small technique, and when you have to do all this difficult stuff with your feet and your legs, at the same time in your upper body you must never show the slightest sign of how hard it is, the hands are so soft, so calm and quiet all the time – that was very difficult.' I am fascinated to see how Osipova turns her big shoulders to advantage; tricky to manage in line, I expect they are, but she exploits them as sources of extra-plastic ports de bras, pouring movement lyrically across her back and along her arms, finishing in a trail of lacy fingertips.

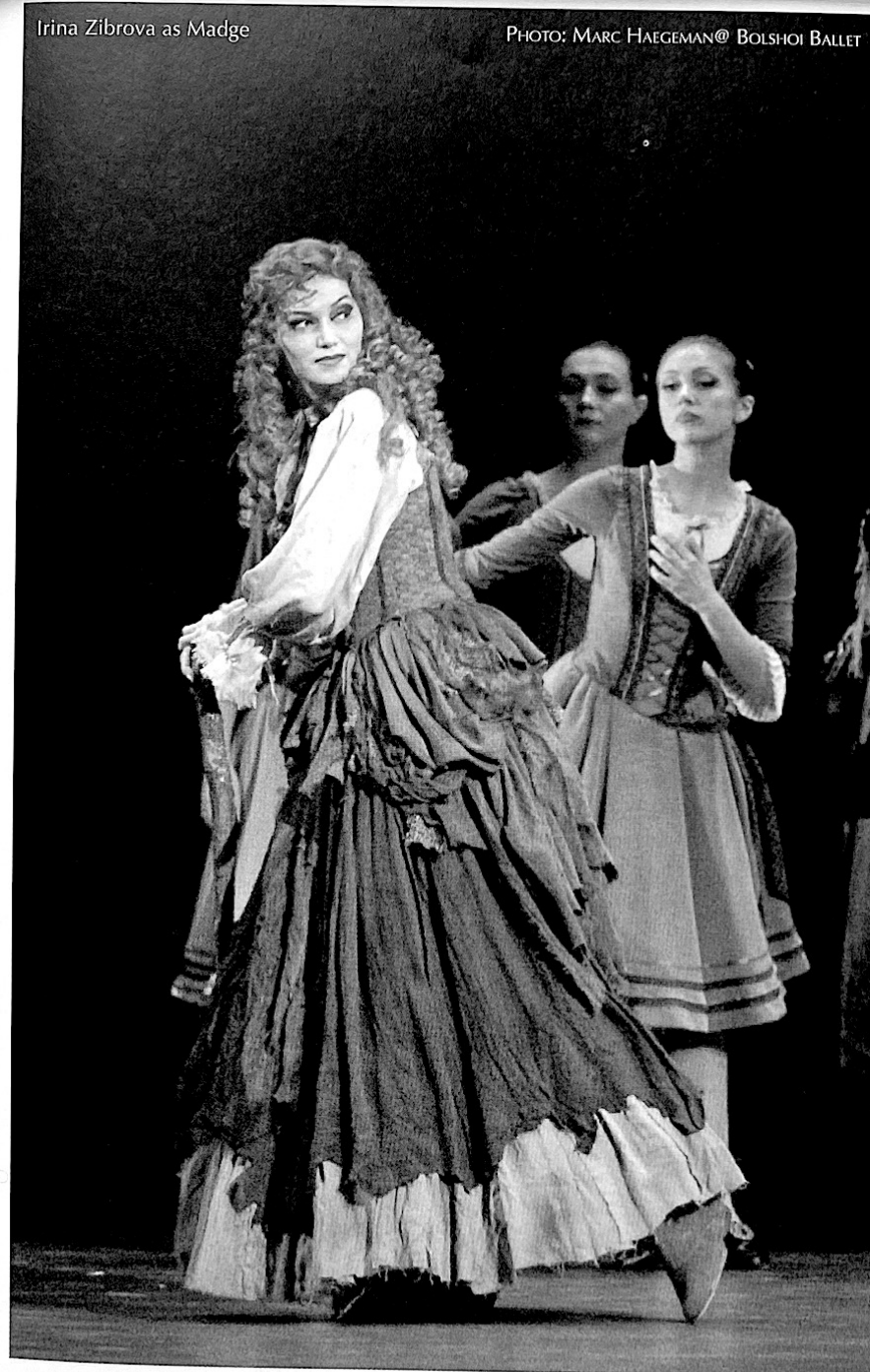
If I found myself comparing Osipova's lightness to Alina Cojocaru's in this role, I was reminded of Tamara Rojo's witchy charm and electric dramatic power at Osipova's playing of the climax, where James destroys her wings and she suddenly goes blind. She told me later: 'My teachers were saying to me, oh don't sniff, don't cry in that scene, but you can't hold back. In the performance, when I'm going blind I was trying to control myself, but suddenly Slava took my hands and looked at me so passionately with his eyes full of tears that I was only a second from bursting into tears. That was so touching I will probably never forget that moment all my life.'

Lopatin was remarkable in the role. With a short body and long limbs, pink young cheeks and deploying a fiery, yeoman's temper he could not be more contrasted with Nikolaj Hübbe's pensive, majestic James in the Danish Ballet film. But his mime was so communicative and characterful that I wholly believed in him and his story. Like Osipova, he also has real épaulement; he rotated his torso with easy flexibility, and he opened his shoulders wide naturally as he dances, which gave his gestures expansiveness as well as firmness, and enabled dazzling switches of direction. His deep soft pliés in landing fostered this springiness, a sense of bouncing off the ground, feet beating very fast but clearly. This James also came over as a handful from Effie's point of view, a man with whom marriage might rapidly have descended into arguments.

I like this kind of inner dramatic coherence which Kobborg, by his unexpected casting, seemed to bring to our subliminal attention. It's valuable to feel you can deduce from the playing whether James and Effie would have been happy, or how the Effie-Gurn marriage will turn out. For instance, Godovsky, Krysanova's James, seemed less enthusiastic, wearing an invariably unhappy expression, and not as

Irina Zibrova as Madge

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accurately virtuosic as Lopatin. Still, the fact that Anna Leonova's Effie was a submissive, domestic girl might well have got on this James's nerves, and one could easily imagine him dreaming of a delicate, naive Krysanova sylph. Godovsky does need to dance with more technical relish, but this is potentially a coherent interpretation.

But Madge is the stirrer of the pot in the story, driving James to kill the Sylphide. Here again Kobborg has busily stitched the inner plot together, playing the same card he played in his London production, which is to indulge the fancy that Madge might be not a witch but a former Sylphide herself. In the earliest productions Madge was traditionally played by a man as a stock witch. When Sorella Englund took up the role in Copenhagen, more than 25 years ago, her extraordinary beauty and raddled elegance, her wildness and mystique as a former great Sylphide, opened up this alluring alternative reading. But logically it creates so many problems (how the crofters can see Madge but not the Sylphide, for instance; why Madge creates spells in a cauldron if she is not a witch, for another) that it arguably also dilutes the insouciant supernaturalism of the original story. Exciting though it can be when Madge pulls up her skirt and reveals what she might be, this moment and its implications (especially if it's a man in the role) seems to be exercising our brains where our imaginations can romp quite happily.

In the first two shows in the Bolshoi, two very Russian approaches towards Madge were offered. Irina Zibrova was a still-young woman of almost Russian doll maquillage, with luxuriant salon-ready red ringlets and clean dress, who was evidently the Sylphide's love-rival. Gennady Yanin, a man of course, and long a specialist in 'dame' roles, gave a more typical Bolshoi hag performance, a raggedy but genial man-witch with hunched back, pleasing the children in the audience. Nei-

ther interpretation tingled my spine, or sold me the Madge-as-Sylphide idea. Regrettably I could not see the third night, when Kobborg himself took the role for the first time – it's perhaps enough to say that the reviews of that show suggested the ballet be retitled *Madge* in his honour.

After the first night, Kobborg told the after-show party with evident pleasure that it may have been the best performance he had ever seen. I asked him later if he meant that: 'I did. I was very happy with all of it, with the leading pair, with Effie, with everything. I shouldn't say this, but I think this works better here in Moscow than it did in London. Something here was less fussy, a little bit more clear. Or maybe it was that some of the Bolshoi style of miming still comes shining through and that maybe makes the acting a little bit naive in places, which sort of works.'

The Moscow reviews were a rich mix from the delighted to some that dripped with disdain. One can't discount theatre-political agendas, such as backing the old or new guards. However, Osipova has garnered a vocal faction against her among Moscow balletomanes, offsetting those who think she is the kind of dancer who will give Russian ballet a new lease of life. (She has won Russia's Golden Mask for best female ballet dancer of the year – her sizzling performance in Tharp's *In the Upper Room* judged by Moscow's panel to beat senior classicists such as Svetlana Zakharova and Maria Alexandrova.) The *Vremya Novosti* critic Anna Gordeeva wrote that the wives and girlfriends of Moscow's businessmen sitting in the stalls were clutching their men to them, so shamelessly was Osipova flirting with the audience. Hostile as the comment was intended to be, it raised a vision of Russian executives escaping all their Effies in the auditorium, and dashing out to chase Osipova through Theatre Square. I don't think that critic realised she was acknowledging a true Sylphide. ●

Ekaterina Krysanova
and Jan Godowsky

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