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Dancing worlds apart

Ismene Brown talks to the modern choreographer Darshan Singh Bhuller about his work with two of ballet's greats

TEXT AS SENT

Darshan Singh Bhuller's next modern dance piece will be about a stripper, but just now he's focusing on the love duet he has made for two of ballet's superstars.

That Altynai Asylmuratova and Irek Mukhamedov have become global legends in their lifetimes is well-known to the adoring masses of ballet-followers, who have fantasised about the exquisite queen of the Kirov and the burly hero of the Bolshoi, Venus and Mars, pirouetting together.

They danced together briefly at the Royal Ballet in the Nineties, where Mukhamedov is the outstanding leading man and Asylmuratova an occasional exotic visitor. Last year, Mukhamedov reformed the partnership for his independent group at Sadler's Wells Theatre. It was a big hit, even if the choreography was not entirely worthy, and the illustrious pair come together this week once again at Sadler's Wells.

This is where Bhuller comes in. His seems the unlikeliest name among the choreographers invited to create work for Asylmuratova and Mukhamedov this time. Dark and mesmerising in looks, with a thick black ponytail, he was one of the Nineties' most outstanding contemporary dancers, a shining star at London Contemporary Dance Theatre, now defunct, and later with Siobhan Davies and Richard Alston.

He last caught attention two years ago with an extraordinary dance-theatre piece about the Bosnian war, powerfully pulling off a high-risk gamble - politics and choreography rarely work together. He has made dances for Phoenix Dance Company and the Shaolin monks of China. And if you saw the Millennium Dome's opening ceremony, you would have seen some of Bhuller's work too - though he's sheepish about admitting it. 'I didn't enjoy it at all. Such a waste of so much.'

A boldly eclectic output, and it's not the only thing that sets Bhuller apart from many other contemporary choreographers. Usually in Britain they are expected to be humble, supplicant figures, scurrying to the Arts Council for their pennies, thankful for any attention - let alone hobnobbing with big-name artists earning 10 times what they do.

It turns out that the broad-minded Mukhamedov is the key. A few years ago, on another of his independent company outings, he asked Bhuller, as a contemporary dance star, to perform on one of his programmes.

'It was an Indian-themed piece I'd done. Irek wasn't dancing it but really liked it, the music, the vocabulary. I said to him afterwards, it would be nice to dance together one day. But I've stopped dancing now. Anyway, he rang me not long ago and said, Could you come and do a duet for me. And he had this idea of doing it with Altynai, who I had no knowledge of at all.'

Stop there, I say in disbelief. *No knowledge* of the world's leading ballerina? And Bhuller patiently explains that ballet and contemporary dance are almost on different planets.

'I know they are big ballet stars, but that doesn't mean much to me,' he replies. 'I don't watch ballet. It really is a million miles away from what I am interested in. I have seen Irek perform and he is probably the only ballet dancer I've seen that I like. He's energetic, masculine, grounded in his weight, more like a contemporary dancer than a ballet dancer. And I like him as a person. He's very open, very funny, very relaxed in rehearsals.'

Altynai, on the other hand, had been rather tense - because she was trying to learn Bhuller's piece during the day while dancing classical ballets in the Kirov's summer London season by night. And his duet could hardly be called classical.

'I think she got rather tired grovelling about on the floor for me,' he says. 'I wish we'd had more time together.'

Bhuller picked on one of India's best-known stories, about Princess Sita, but with a twist. 'I went back to the source of her name. My daughter is called Sita - which means "princess" now. But originally it meant "furrow", the lines you put into the land. The farmer and his wife would make the lines, sow the seeds, and they would lie in the furrows to wait for the sun. And it was that simple vision of people lying down waiting, making love or whatever, that was the source for the piece for me.

It is very floor-based, as most of my stuff is. It's sensual, about making love.'

I learn many interesting things from Darshan. One, that ballet dancers dislike rolling on the ground because they are so bony. Two, that ballet dancers, if asked to do a contemporary move, will instinctively turn it into the nearest ballet step. Three, that ballet dancers like being told what to dance - they want to pick it up at once, they don't play with movement, reinvent it, draw it deep into their own bodies, the way contemporary dancers are trained to do.

It's like the difference between classical and jazz musicians, I suggest - one lives by improvising, the other by the expression of a formed vocabulary. Can they really meet, or is it just a diplomatic handshake that goes on between art forms, not fully satisfying anyone?

'Yes, they have amazing facility in their bodies and techniques, and you go in there, and you feel like, These are great toys!' he answers. 'But in the end you want to bring something else in too. I'm always amazed by the interest ballet people show in contemporary. I just wonder why they have those desires - why not just become a modern dancer instead? It's two different vocabularies, and it's not something they are trained for. Why can't we have a Royal Contemporary Dance Theatre? Hey, there's an idea.'

We also discuss his remarkable piece about Bosnia, 'Planted Seeds', and the even more remarkable fact that by addressing such subjects, Bhuller has isolated himself from the mainstream of British contemporary dance. And pays a price.

'Planted Seeds' was inspired by newspaper stories about Christian and Muslim families torn apart, just as Bhuller's Sikh grandparents felt torn apart from Muslim and Hindu neighbours during the Partition of India. The Arts Council were reluctant to support this deviation from their categories, he says - not abstract, not 'ethnic', not politically correct. Despite that, many many people nationwide were affected by seeing 'Planted Seeds', with its devastating stories of rape and violence sparely told, with an old man and a trapeze artist among its cast. 'It was my proudest achievement,' he says.

Bhuller's next piece will also fix on human interest. In December his company will perform a work about a strip club, telling the stories of a stripper who supports a dying father, and an Asian punter at the club who beats his wife at home, and ends up murdered by her.

'That story came from a real one a couple of years ago. Wife-beating is something in the Indian community that's not publicly recognised - it's almost a way of life, and I grew up in it. And I want to express that. My current dilemma is finding two Asian dancers who are modern-trained. But as for my stripper,' he says, stepping into the narrow Soho street outside our restaurant, 'I've been haunting this area for weeks, and I think I've found her.'

'Irek and Altynai' are at Sadler's Wells Theatre from tonight till Saturday.