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## Darcey conquers Russia



PHOTO: Bill Cooper

**Ismene Brown was the only British critic present when Darcey Bussell made history by dancing with the Kirov at the weekend. She reports from St Petersburg**

IN St Petersburg it is minus 15C and outside the Maryinsky Theatre the pavements are solid with ice. The little rivers that thread through the vast boulevards are frozen white, and in this temperature people don't stop to talk.

But this is the world's most ballet-mad city, and last week phone lines burned. When the Kirov Ballet invited Darcey Bussell to become the first Royal Ballet ballerina to star in one of their hallowed productions, it caused a frenzy of curiosity.

The legendary Maryinsky is the very stage on which *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* were made, and no wonder the Kirov's public have believed that the company has no challengers. They get few chances to see that the rest of the world can dance a bit too. Margot Fonteyn led the Royal Ballet's Russian tour in 1961 (pre-Nureyev) but she never guested at the Kirov. Until last weekend the only foreign ballerinas favoured with an inside invitation were Beryl Grey - though she was no longer with the RB by the time the call came - the Cuban Alicia Alonso and the French Sylvie Guillem.

Bussell's two performances were sold out, and the great and good were there in force for her opening night. I sat next to Faroukh Ruzimatov and Diana Vishneva, two of today's stars whom London fêted at the Coliseum last summer. In the lobby I had passed the pallid figure of the director-who-is-not-there, Oleg Vinogradov, supposedly sacked for corruption yet still on the payroll. The RB's director Sir Anthony Dowell and Bussell's new husband Angus Forbes were greeted by the Kirov's present director Makhar Vaziev, while the attendant in the champagne bar carefully arranged green plastic flowers among the black caviar canapés.

The Maryinsky auditorium rivals Covent Garden for magnificence, all azure and gold. The Tsars' extravagant curtained box is surrounded by five gilded balconies hung with crystal chandeliers, with nymphs and cherubs circling solemnly in the turquoise ceiling.

Friday the 13th is lucky in Russia, but 28-year-old Bussell had a mountain to climb in several respects. The Kirov's reputation has recently been revived by

three incomparable stars, Altynai Asylmuratova, Uliana Lopatkina and Igor Zelensky, as well as a raft of new young pretenders. Bussell had to show St Petersburg why Zelensky had asked for her.

He is king of the Kirov surely today's greatest young male dancer, a man in whom artistry, technique and nature have combined in someone for whom the extraordinary is ordinary. And Bussell was dancing a role that is not ideal for her, the tragic Indian temple dancer Nikiya in *La Bayadère*.

This is one of Petersburg's dearest ballets, an exotic tale of jealousy, death by snake-bite and opium dreams, in which a long line of illustrious Nikiyas have groomed the public's taste, among them Rudolf Nureyev's first partner Natalia Dudinskaya, Alla Shelest and Asylmuratova.

Bussell was obviously a bag of nerves on Friday night, yet she willed herself through - from an unfamiliar, near-collapsing one-legged lift in Act I that had her giggling in relief when she managed it, through a moving death scene, to a final Shades act in which she at last showed that shining classical luxury in her legs and bodyline, that sincere goodness of heart. By the end of the evening she had won. There were four substantial bouquets of red roses and white lilies, and six curtain calls for her and Zelensky.

Her success was all the more remarkable because she was dancing on a sloping stage that put her at some physical risk. The Maryinsky rake is one of the chief reasons for the sinuousness of Kirov dancers in comparison with English ones - taught in sloping studios, they learn to counterbalance the rake in their bodies with more flexible angles and curves.

Bussell is an exceptionally upright dancer, her lines straight, high and wide, and her swift attacking *jetés* formed for the level, not a downhill course. She resisted any temptation to copy Kirov ways and stayed true to herself. Next to the sultry Irma Nioradze as her rival in love, and in the gorgeous jungle setting, she looked like Grace Kelly in a borrowed sari - out of place but irresistible.\

The veteran Kirov ballerina Gabriella Komleva went on television news on Saturday disparaging Bussell's inexperience and lack of nuance. However Professor Igor Stupnikov, a leading ballet writer, later told me that he was distressed by this. Reaction among his circle, he said, was "entirely favourable".

Despite her strained start, Bussell's Nikiya was "new, fresh and elegant", Stupnikov said. "She is beautifully schooled and has great sincerity, she has lovely light jumps and we like very much her soft landings. You don't find such quietness at the Kirov. Her drama was most convincing and natural, not overdone as it is often here."

What I found most striking was Bussell's effect on Zelensky. Only 26, this sombre, blond six-footer has astounded Russia, America and Britain with his vast leaps, perfectionist detail and Heathcliff soul. For me he is at his finest when he meets his match in complexity, such as Asylmuratova and Lopatkina. With Bussell however - whom he partnered in the Royal Ballet's production of *La Bayadère* last year - there is undeniably a special personal spark.

"Zelensky is in love with her!" exclaimed one ballet-watcher to me on Friday. Since Zelensky is actually in love with the skater Ekaterina Gordieva, and Bussell is climb in several respects. The Kirov's reputation has recently been revived by

newly married, that has to be put down to spectator hyperbole. But it's an understandable reaction - with Bussell he seems to soar higher than ever, frowns more deeply, swirls even faster across the stage. This weekend he reportedly said, "She is my favourite ballerina in the whole world."

He is easily bored, but when inspired Zelensky is an artist as Nureyev and Baryshnikov were, which is why Bussell's contribution to his artistic well-being is so significant. He has an ability to make those implausible ballet stories electric with life.

Bussell has not only a similarly bold and statuesque physical attack, she also has a serene simplicity to her nature. With other, reticent partners it can look bland, but with Zelensky she is led rather than leading; she relaxes and expands here dancing. She brings out a charming protectiveness in him, but also makes him take greater risks as if to match her sense of belief. It isn't a match of two hungry people, like Fonteyn and Nureyev - that other great pairing of London and St Petersburg. On stage Zelensky and Bussell are complementary in a more classical way, Apollo and Terpsichore, a poet and his muse.

Perhaps this was clearer and more moving on Zelensky's home territory than on Bussell's, and it may never happen again at the Kirov, where there are two many home ballerinas to fit in a regular guest. The two will have to find their chances to dance together. We will see them this summer in *Manon* in the RB's Coliseum season, and after that things look more complicated.

All the same, Bussell must be very happy. St Petersburg may take some getting used to the idea - but she's clearly the number one girl of the number one man.