

Exit, In Flames

Alexei Ratmansky and the Bolshoi, by Ismene Brown



Photo Marc Haegemann/Bolshoi Ballet

THIS WINTER the Bolshoi Ballet ends five rollercoaster years under the directorship of Alexei Ratmansky (*interview below*), who is stepping down as artistic director in order to focus on his first love, choreography. His directorship began in controversy for Russians - he was young, an 'outsider' (he had never made it into the Bolshoi Ballet as a dancer), and he was full of 'Western' ideas. Most of all, Ratmansky didn't make Yuri Grigorovich his god, as by now the majority of Bolshoi personnel expected. They, after all, were all Grigorovich alumni and acolytes.

It had been stated that Ratmansky's final production would be a new *Sleeping Beauty* this autumn to replace Grigorovich's version (cheers from us in the West), but we have long learned that when the Bolshoi announces something it is not a decision but merely a debating point. Ratmansky, it was said last spring, would move over to keep charge of the Bolshoi's momentum in 'new productions', while Yuri Burlaka governed day-to-day direction and the octogenarian former director Yuri Grigorovich would be back in charge of his productions of the classics. Such a broken-backed push-me-pull-you marriage between an immovable past and resistible change seemed unlikely to survive, and so it proved. The management's retraction of the announced new *Sleeping Beauty* is proof of that. Meanwhile Grigorovich's favourite, the vain star dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze had been sniping increasingly publicly about Ratmansky's directorship, turning up the heat once he was secure in the knowledge that Grigorovich was back inside the theatre.

So, in the end, Ratmansky's last production as director will not be the long-awaited first step in cleansing the stables of Grigorovich's heavy-

handicapped, but his last original invention, *The Flames of Paris*, this summer. This in itself is a rewrite, an engrossing, not remotely slavish homage to a long-time landmark of the Bolshoi's Soviet past. And indeed, as usual, it was quite a bonfire of received ideas.

Vasily Vainonen's 1932 ballet was a favourite of Stalin's, a full-evening ballet-as-slogan, linking the French Revolution with the Soviet one, through peasants leaping in breathtakingly healthy vigour while monarchists minced and murdered with effete viciousness. But this broad political cartoon, however powerful some of its choreography, served its own heated time. The Russian audience now can't sympathise with that discredited Utopia, and Ratmansky took a perhaps too sophisticated risk, turning a populist OTT contemporary caricature for the masses into a coolly clever balletic game for today's appreciative balletomanes, layering five centuries of music, story, symbolism and ballet technique together in a theatrical mille-feuilles that includes some beloved Vainonen numbers while being defiantly Ratmanskian.

He'd taken out one simplistic idea - the people as a heroic collective - and substituted another, a story of two pairs of lovers, one divided by revolution, another united by it. Where Vainonen's leading character was an actress (Ulanova at the 1932 Leningrad premiere) who quits performing for the king to become the Revolution's figurehead, Ratmansky picked out couples drawn from Vainonen's dramatic personae. In his new version Jérôme and Jeanne, peasant siblings in restive Marseilles, fall foul of the villainous local Marquise, who succeeds only in bringing Jérôme to his aristocratic daughter's romantic attention and pushing Jeanne into the angry arms of Marseilles' chief revolutionary Philippe. By contrasting the certain, unified Jeanne/Philippe and the more vulnerable Jérôme/Adelina, Ratmansky transmitted a more sceptical message for today: what price revolution for the idealist when he loses his loved one?

In any case the original had been something of a mess. Galina Ulanova spoke in her 2005 memoirs of her bewilderment at what Vainonen wanted back in 1932. Her role was as a symbolic figure, not a dramatic one. She played only half the role of Mireille de Poitiers, a celebrity actress performing at Versailles for King Louis XVI - the other half was taken by a singer. Thanks to this device, Ulanova had "hardly any real dance" to do apart from her court divertissement, a classical allegory of the goddess Armida and her unfaithful lover Rinaldo which Ulanova tried to perform, she said, with the decadent affectation of the corrupt aristocratic world. After that scene her dancing "practically disappeared", and she had to become a pantomimic figure leading the

herocoproletariat with a virtuosic extra solo variation by Ratmansky for

The story was so complicated (Cyril Beaumont's summary gamely struggles on for eight pages) that Ulanova pointed out you had to grasp the detail of the synopsis, or you didn't realise, for instance, what the fatal piece of paper was that Mistral had read, leading to his execution, or that Mireille ran out of the palace at the Act 2 curtain not in fear but to warn the advancing revolutionaries.

I thought Ratmansky's surgery was a *tour de force*. He had to start by deciding how much Vainonen to keep, and used the three best-known setpieces as landmarks on which to hang a more contemporarily persuasive story and new choreography, its style in Vainonen homage without looking like museum pastiche. Mireille was untenable as a character so he turned her into a pure dancing role as the Act 2 classical divert, while raising two couples from the proletariat to give the revolution more human, real focus.

The Bolshoi has thrown unstinting resources at the production. It is designed with an evocative clash of modern and 18th-century elegance, sets by Ilya Utkin and Evgeny Monakhov like antique French engravings in black and white, splashed with the vigorous primary colours (red, white and blue predominant, naturally) of Elena Markovskaya's costumes. The Versailles courtiers appear drained, powdered, fastidiously etiolated. More and more colour, principally red, infused the sets as the story unfolded, blood shed, but also new blood carrying away papery old tokens.

Yuri Burlaka, the historical expert who is to succeed Ratmansky nominally as chief, prepared a new edition of Boris Asafiev's 1932 score, a real treasure. Asafiev (who composed the colourful *Fountains of Bakhchisarai* too) is traditionally undersold as a mere 'musicologist', for his expertise at musical tailoring. But he does what John Lanchbery did in *La Fille mal gardée*, expertly and creatively sewing together 17th- and 18th-century French musical themes and references - Lully, Marin Marais and Gluck among others - into a dance score of epicurean style and listenability. The finishing touch is how it suggests ballet-music written not so long after the French Revolution, Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*.

Ratmansky's choreography has incorporated and bounced off celebrated Vainonen motifs, but he doesn't do the obvious with the music; peasants don't always rip and roar, courtiers don't always mince. The two couples, draped in French flags, have traditional pas de deux, acrobatic and brilliant for Jeanne and Philippe, dainty and touching for Jerome and Adelina, while the Armida/Rinaldo court divertissement is styled inventively as Thirties Bolshoi classicism, costumed in fabulously

first night, the drag to Adeline's exit is on the Rev by Ratmansk for Cupid.

ON first night, to start with, I thought we might be in for a flop. The opening act felt unnervingly old-fashioned as it expounded its characters and ingredients, the young brother and sister - hopeful of fun and romance - the evil Marquise, his lovely daughter, how he tries to rape Jeanne (very explicitly done). Jérôme lands in jail where Adeline meets him, Jeanne encounters the local Revolutionary Philippe and they are mutually attracted - story, story story with a great deal of rather too faithfully Sovietique arm-waving and awkwardly athletic choreography. But then Ratmanky's soufflé started rising, swiftly and surely, richer and richer in flavour, court dances and rebels, crowds and individuals, seasoning with pinches of Vainonen, echoes of *Giselle* and *Don Quixote*, garnished with balletic and political bonbons, and just enough emotional material for today's very deft and on-the-ball Bolshoi dancers to have fun with.

Certainly I thought the "Armida-Rinaldo" scene went on too long (though the Furies and paper scenery have a very endearing "Pyramus and Thisbe" feel straight from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) but Armida/Mireille is undoubtedly a wonderful ballerina role (Anna Antonicheva misfired, piling on the 'decadent' affectation at expense of style). The dances for courtiers were elegant and rather poignantly fastidious - I felt sorry for them somehow, though the audience loved rather more than I did a clumsy episode where Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette display what cack-handed dancers they are (Ludmila Semenyaka of all people appeared in Marie-Antoinette's role, looking a far cry from the glorious creature who broke our hearts on Bolshoi tours 15 years ago).

The peasant dances storm like thunder and lightning, Vainonen's own *Dance of the Basques* and *Carmagnola* riproaringly done by the Bolshoi's magnificently eager troops, particularly the boys to whom Ratmanky has given a real work-out. The first cast starred the eyewatering Maria Alexandrova as Jeanne, whose technique is nowadays so sophisticated in its brilliance, and her party spirit so irresistible, that you couldn't expect the men in her life - Denis Savin (brother) and Alexander Volchkov (lover) - to match her. The second night, all round, trumped the first, with Natalia Osipova and Vyacheslav Lopatin as the headstrong siblings, playing with pink-cheeked naturalness like teenagers going crazy with idealism, Ivan Vasiliev performing phenomenal feats as the idolised Marseillais leader, and that treasure of delicate naturalism Anastasya Goryacheva touching the heart more than Nina Kaptsova on

something as the tragic Adeline, who hangs in the Revolution, until she finds her father on the scaffold.

When or if we eventually see *The Flames of Paris* in London on a Bolshoi tour (who knows, now that Ratmansky's out of favour?) we will protest that the ending really does pile on the melodrama too much - there's a surely redundant Madame Defarge crone, and when Adeline's severed head was placed in Jérôme's arms I had to stifle a giggle. But the final mass advance to the footlights by the victorious peasants, faces stern, was Vainonen's last image, with Ratmansky's own clever take. Because as they advance, they swallow up the figure of the grieving Jérôme, turning him heedlessly into collateral damage. As a comment on the Soviet Union's waste of human beings, it is inspired.

AFTER the premiere I met up with Ratmansky and he talked to me of his feelings about his embattled directorship and where, if anywhere, he thinks Russian ballet is heading.

Ismene Brown: Why did you want to do 'Flames' for your last original production?

Alexei Ratmansky: There was something there that took my attention. I love ballet history, and there are spots that are really interesting to me, like Diaghilev's time or the last years of Petipa, the end of the Twenties to the beginning of the Thirties. You can see so many possibilities of that time that weren't used properly later on. Look at the generation of choreographers then... Lopukhov was there and Goleisovsky, but Lavrovsky, Zakharov, Vainonen, Chabukiani emerged, and they were given carte blanche to do full-length ballets on new themes, new music.

IB: Why then, but not now?

AR: Because then there was such a demand for new ballets. There isn't now. They had an entire Imperial repertory to replace. We read now about theatres wanting new ballets but there isn't a real need in the general public for new ballets, or at least for those who come to the Bolshoi. And for some dancers now there isn't the hunger for new work. They can realise themselves as artists doing old ballets, they feel secure in old territory. You can't blame them for it, and it's fine, it's a school. And there is nothing higher than classicism, they can aspire to perfect Odette or Nikiya through their whole career. But now theatres here don't want to take risks... if they risk and get negative reviews, it becomes very difficult for a new project to get launched.

IB: What compromises did you make for this?

AR: I felt this was a title that could combine modernity, tradition, the public's demands, my own, many criteria. Vainonen's choreography for 'Flames' was

something to build on, with great. Two things I stuck to, the about it, the the sophistication of its rhythmic phrases, and also when he does folk dances, the simplicity but also the inevitability of the phrase. Simple and great. You can't imagine anything else, when you see it. It just works. So, stylistically for me it was difficult because I wanted to be myself, and yet I couldn't do anything that would go against the Vainonen original.

IB: How much of the original exists?

AR: Well, there is a film. I discovered part of it too late, when I'd already choreographed some of Act 2. Two pas de deux - Jeanne and Philippe at the end and the Armida-Rinaldo one, to which I added a quartet of girls and Amour. I know it's too long, and I was thinking about cutting it. In this pas de deux Vainonen didn't want to use 18th-century stylisation - you can see it's 1930s. The rest had to be in the same direction.

IB: What did people expect? That you'd restore all the Vainonen?

AR: Some did. And I wanted to originally. I would have, if I'd had more material.

IB: Why? Are you a revolutionary at heart?

AR: Well... what do you think of Moscow now? You can sense this anger on the street. The concentration of it in places is almost unbearable. You can't see smiling people on the street. The national character has changed.

IB: I've seen pensioners begging, old people selling cabbage in the street in the winter, which made me furious.

AR: I don't think people see the poverty or misery any more. They're so concentrated on their own income that they ignore everything else. It's really very cynical and bad.

IB: So there's a correspondence between that and doing this old ballet?

AR: Yes, there is. I was thinking about the good side of that Russia, which was dreaming in a universal way. It must be still there now, deep down, I think. So perhaps I thought I could touch it and update it. And of course when it was done, *Flames* was a contemporary ballet.

IB: It was about popular feelings, wasn't it, the feelings of the people in the audience. Tell me about the unique relationship ballet and politics have had in your country in the past century.

AR: I think I said what I thought about it in *Flames of Paris*! Because really ballet needs to be where the money is. It is visible in history that it doesn't really matter who has the power when a good ballet is made. There are only a few precious periods when ballet was partially using ideas of democracy, working around them, the ideas that are contemporary now.

IB: Thinking about the Twenties in Russia, a choreographer was well cultured

IB: Has it been more without knowing their history, their music, their academic vocabulary, literature, theatre.

AR: It's true, but they were also working with a simple motive. From the end of the Twenties, they did less and less true experimenting - they wanted the experiments to be 'understood' by a simple audience. And that was a very interesting experiment itself, to try to simplify without sacrificing quality.

IB: Why did they throw away romance? The strange thing is that when Lavrovsky, Zakharov and Grigorovich put romance back centre stage, they idealised the characters.

AR: They were less human. The complexity of the human being was gone, completely.

IB: I wonder if that isn't the most difficult thing now for choreographers to cope with. The complexity of individuals. In literature of course, say Russian literature, you have deeply complex characters. But your ballet in this country became far more simplistic while in Europe they become more complex.

AR: That's the result of politics, purely. That's got to change now. But I think with the dancers we have done something about that. There are more and more dancers here who are really into psychological truth. Thanks to John Neumeier, who did 'Dream', thanks to Johan Kobborg, doing the new 'Sylphide' here, we're working in the same direction, but which is very different from the Bolshoi before.

IB: What's the critical reaction here to *Flames of Paris*?

AR: Very mixed. It's hard to tell. Critics have a lot of connections inside the company, and I know what this or that critic will say, broadly. I think they expected more new choreography, and that the first act is much weaker than the second. One critic said my past and the Bolshoi past were travelling in such different directions that finally this production proved they could never meet. That I should pack up my things.

IB: What do you think ten years from now you'd like them to understand or grasp about what you did here?

AR: Getting back the sense of reality on stage, I think. Of course I could have been more daring with 'modern' acquisitions or something. I started like that, but I thought, it has to be a slower process. The school is against it. They don't prepare dancers who are ready for anything [such as Tharp, Wheeldon or Forsythe]. Those who are physically talented from nature can do it. But the school doesn't help them learn to change their centre of gravity. And also ideologically they're not that open.

IB: Has your directorship worked out roughly as you expected?

AR: Well, of course I knew it would not be easy. Nothing unexpected.

IB: Why do you think it's different? Some days you win, some days you lose. And I learn

AR: No.

IB: Really? Nikolai Tsiskaridze has been pretty relentless.

AR: Well, I think in other theatres he'd have been fired for what he says about the theatre or myself. But somehow the general director and myself let him speak out a little bit at the beginning, and then he felt that he could do more and more, and we lost the right moment of stopping him. Does he represent a really strong movement here? It's difficult to figure out. And of course the mood changes. After our great season in London everything was fine, and he was all right. But then something doesn't got the right way for him, and he's off again.

IB: Good reviews abroad don't always help, do they?

AR: No, it's true. Because people interpret it that, for instance, we're paying certain critics to write something nice. A lot of silly things you get here.

IB: Has being director held you up as a choreographer?

AR: I don't know. I think I definitely changed as a choreographer in those years. But I don't sit and analyse it. I just think: it's the right time to do *Flames of Paris*, and I do it.

IB: What are you most proud of?

AR: Well, I like the fact that there is a new generation, who think differently. Part of that is that I saw them and gave them a chance. And *Bright Stream* was a good memory.

IB: Will the company work better with two theatres when the Main Stage reopens?

AR: It will be much better, because the repertoire will be divided between two stages. It should work well, as long as they don't just want to make as much money as possible with constant simultaneous performances.

IB: And you'd like to continue working here for a long time?

AR: It depends. I have a feeling I need some time off from this place. There are some wonderful projects and commissions that I want to concentrate on and give my best. There is a project here, a historic ballet with a very nice subject and a commissioned score. Not next year but the year after.

IB: So you won't be seen here next year though you are supposedly chief guest choreographer?

AR: No.

IB: No *Sleeping Beauty*?

AR: No. It would have been great for me to do it, but I don't want that much controversy. Fighting will not enable me to give my best. It's a war here!

Every day is different. Some days you win, some days you lose. And I learn about myself every day - not always very pleasant things. I think I was developing as a person. I am actually proud of some things I did here.

IB: What would you warn this theatre about?

AR: The worst thing is the snobbery of this place, that 'we are the best because we are the Bolshoi'. That I hate. And maybe I did something intentionally or unintentionally to challenge this, by inviting guest artists, or giving them material that they had to struggle to work on, to discover their weak sides. This is the aspect they need to process here over time. But at the same time there *is* a Bolshoi that I feel I helped to reshape a little. All those repertory additions and ideas were the answer to my view of what the Bolshoi is now, in this century.