

'He is the best English man'



Photo Bill Cooper

Bruce Sansom is the Royal Ballet's hidden star. His foreign colleagues may take the headlines, but his is a distinctive talent, says Ismene Brown

EVERY DAY in ballet class Irek Mukhamedov suffers a little, because of one of his colleagues. This man does quite easily what the Russian star finds hardest. He epitomises all that is great in the "English style" of the Royal Ballet. And his artistry rivals that of Mukhamedov.

Yet tonight, when the brilliant and famous Mukhamedov takes the applause for his first *Petrushka* at Covent Garden, the brilliant and not-so-famous Bruce Sansom will be slipping unmobbed out of the stage door, after giving the company's first London performance of a Balanchine masterpiece, *Duo Concertant*, earlier on the bill.

Had Mukhamedov not arrived at the Royal Ballet in 1990, Sansom might now have been the company's biggest male name. Older observers see in his poised musicality echoes of two of Britain's most fascinating dancers, Anthony Dowell and Donald MacLeary.

It is a style that, some argue, is vanishing from the company under the impact of more glamorous, bolder artists such as Mukhamedov - who himself says he would love to be able to master it.

"Bruce is the best English man, pure, classical, romantic, lyrical. I have to work very hard at classicism but for him it's so easy," says the Tartar enviously. "In class we do occasionally give each other corrections, but it's very difficult to find any corrections for him.

"I liked very much his Oberon in Ashton's *The Dream*, all quick movements, and all expressive and very clean. To do all this so fast and clearly is very difficult."

Sansom cheerfully waves away the idea that he suffered in Mukhamedov's substantial shadow. "I don't mind at all missing out the attention. It meant losing some of the public pressure. You're freer to learn more about yourself. I've developed late, and if I had all that pressure I might not have."

There have been times when the Royal Ballet looked unsure of its own stars, treating them more like a supporting act to foreign residents such as Mukhamedov and Sylvie Guillem. But the Ashton revival this season has at last propelled Sansom to his rightful place, not below but alongside Mukhamedov.

Where Mukhamedov brings out the almost Verdian passion and richness of MacMillan's ballets, Sansom is a lithe, Mozartian dancer.

"Irek and I are at opposite ends of the Royal Ballet. And I steal from him where possible, even given that we are so different," says Sansom cheerfully.

Sansom, 31, a Newbury boy, the youngest of four children whose parents, a nurse and a scientist, would leave their three-year-old watching his sisters' Saturday ballet class while they went shopping. He joined in from the start, drawn in "by just moving to music".

Now, after 13 years in the Royal Ballet, he is midway through a season of astonishing range, from romantic princes in *Cinderella*, *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, dramatic leads in *The Dream* and *Daphnis and Chloë*, to plotless music-works such as *Symphonic Variations* and *Duo Concertant*. He has a talent which has taken time to mature; we are now seeing him in his prime.

A company man to his fingertips, he generously points out that he is on the crest of a new wave of male dancing at the company. The pre-eminence of ballerinas is being challenged by a host of charismatic young men.

"Look how many principal males there are now compared with females. When has that ever been the case? It's not the kind of world where we would take over but we've come a long way."

It may have taken three Russians, Nureyev, Baryshnikov and Mukhamedov, to spice up British male dancing, but it is Sansom's example that trumpets a lively future for "the English style".

Royal Ballet's 'Stravinsky Staged' opens at Covent Garden tonight; in repertory until May 11