

## Keeper of old scores



Photo Steffan Hill

### **Without the intervention of a forgotten English ballerina, the recent historic production of 'The Sleeping Beauty' might never have happened. Ismene Brown meets its unsung heroine, Mona Inglesby**

THE visit by the Kirov Ballet with their new "authentic" production of 'The Sleeping Beauty' last month climaxed one of the most extraordinary stories in recorded ballet history. The production had depended upon discovering that the original texts of the immortal ballets created by the genius of St Petersburg, Marius Petipa, had been smuggled out of Revolutionary Russia, via London, to safe house in an American museum.

These unique texts were virtually unnoticed through the Soviet period, until the Kirov, free once more, decided to return to their Imperial roots, and strip the classics of a century of changes and varnishings. The return next Monday of their spectacular restoration of 'The Sleeping Beauty' in its original 1890 form will give us a chance now to hail the unsung heroine of this remarkable tale - a long-forgotten English ballerina.

Mona Inglesby is 82 now, beautiful, poised but very frail. For many years she has lived quietly in a rest home in Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, hardly noticed, and yet her story is stranger than fiction. She trained in her teens in Paris with the Tsar's mistress, the legendary ballerina Mathilde Kchessinskaya, where she fell in love with Russian classical ballet (then little known in Britain). In 1940, aged only 22, she launched the International Ballet, challenging the dominance of Sadler's Wells Ballet and the Ballet Rambert. It was wartime, but with an initial loan from her entrepreneur father, she amassed 40 dancers, later rising to 80.

And she offered her company to the former balletmaster of the legendary Maryinsky Ballet of St Petersburg to stage the Russian classics as he had produced them under the Tsar.

When choreographers Petipa, Lev Ivanov and Mikhail Fokine created ballets such as 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Swan Lake' and 'Les Syphides', it was Sergeyev who taught the steps to the Imperial company. He had also been the last leader of a 25-year Maryinsky project to record the entire repertoire of ballets on paper. By the Revolution 24 ballets and 24 opera-ballets had been notated under their creators' eyes: irreplaceable texts the equivalent to ballet of Shakespeare's Folios to theatre.

Sergeyev feared that these ballets - peppered with Tsarist glorification and religious and folkloric symbolism - were at serious risk in the new Bolshevik republic. In 1918 he and his wife, under cover of official emigration, secretly packed the sheafs of loose paper into wooden crates and arranged to smuggle them out.

Inglesby recalls, "I remember Maestro telling me that the last leg of the trip was from Riga, and I think he said the notations were brought over by the British Navy. He had to let them out of his sight. Madam Sergeyev said it was a terrible, frightening time."

At first Sergeyev found willing takers for his priceless knowledge: Serge Diaghilev at the Ballets Russes, then Ninette de Valois, who engaged him for 10 years to produce the classics upon which what is now the Royal Ballet was founded. But as her company developed its own creative momentum, things changed. St Petersburg's balletmaster found himself overruled by the dynamic de Valois, and suffered to see Petipa's work being altered by young choreographers such as Frederick Ashton and Bronislava Nijinska (now recognised as 20th-century geniuses).

"I think he was treated abominably," says Inglesby, tight-lipped. "He was so unhappy at Sadler's Wells. He was very glad to come to International Ballet, because we wanted to do everything the way he wanted it. That was all he lived for, to keep these Maryinsky productions alive."

AND she asks me to put something important on record: "I must make it clear that Sergeyev insisted I should be the ballerina at International Ballet or he would not do his productions with

us. I didn't put myself forward - he put me forward."

She insists upon this because one of the crosses Inglesby has had to bear was the constant snipe that the company was a vehicle funded by a devoted father for his hopeful ballerina daughter. Yet International Ballet was a major touring company of 80 dancers that turned in a profit for 12 years in austere times, she says proudly. Its large classical productions had the most fashionable designers around. The Royal Festival Hall opened in 1951 with six weeks of International Ballet. The Royal Ballet star Moira Shearer, once an IB member, remembers Inglesby as "a lovely, very fluid classical dancer... a real pleasure to watch".

But crisis came after Sergeyev's death in 1951, aged 76. Perhaps old age and widowerhood made him homesick for Russia. Perhaps his trust in Britain had been shaken by seeing the increasingly grand Sadler's Wells Ballet opening Covent Garden in 1946 with a new 'Sleeping Beauty' that made several alterations to his original staging.

At any rate, he did something unexpected, and which has been wrongly recorded in history books. Inglesby wants to make clear that in his will Sergeyev did not bequeath his historic notations to her.

"Oh no, to my great surprise, he left them all to a friend of his who was not interested in ballet at all." A Russian, she thinks. "I was horrified. Would they just moulder away, be destroyed forever? And I asked my father please to buy them, so they would be rescued. As far as I remember it cost £200, and Sergeyev's friend was only too happy to get rid of them."

INGLESBY now had the precious notations, but without Sergeyev's strict hand International Ballet had run its course. In 1953, she folded it, quit ballet, and turned to family life. Still, the Sergeyev crates, stored in her mother's basement in Kensington Gore, were much on her mind. In the 1960s she began hunting for a permanent home for them.

She offered them to the Royal Ballet - "they said 'no thank you', and I was quite pleased. I don't like Ninette de Valois anyway." She contacted the former Maryinsky Ballet (renamed the Kirov in 1935) and "someone came over to meet at the Grosvenor Hotel". But these were the tense years after Nureyev's inflammatory defection - no deal. Finally, the Harvard Theatre Collection in Boston promised safe keeping in perpetuity. In 1969 they purchased the Sergeyev notations for around £6,000.

Even then, this fraught tale seemed hardly likely to have its due happy ending. By now every company had its own versions of these classics, and almost no one could read the archaic Maryinsky notation system. It took another political revolution in Russia, and the immensely brave step by the Kirov to reclaim its past, to bring these pencilled sheets of enigmatic marks back to a central position of authority.

For Mona Inglesby the recognition, at long last, that she did right by Sergeyev has been the best possible medicine - even if the Kirov hasn't been in touch to invite her to see 'The Sleeping Beauty'.

"I wouldn't expect them to. I'm an old ballerina now, an ancient lady," she says, with immense dignity. "I can't make such a journey nowadays." But they should be so grateful to her, I say. "Maybe they are, maybe not. I don't really mind. So long as these things are going to be well looked after and treated with respect, I am quite happy."