

Keeping the dance master's dream alive



Photo Glynn Griffiths

Anastasia was choreographer Kenneth MacMillan's most personal project and most painful flop. Now it is being revived under the supervision of his widow. She talks to Ismene Brown

WIDOWS of great creators have more to do than mourn; they become posterity's housekeepers too, looking after the books, the paintings, the scores, the scripts - keeping them gleaming at the front of the shelf to attract a new generation's eye.

The widows of great ballet choreographers have a more onerous task. When Sir Kenneth MacMillan died suddenly in 1992 his wife, a painter with no dance background, found herself the custodian of not just the content of his works but that most elusive and contentious of things, style.

"Dance is ephemeral stuff, and if the wrong people are in control of it, then it can go wrong," she says feelingly.

MacMillan was careful to have his ballets notated, but what drove and shaped his choreography was an emotionalism more visible than in any other choreographer's work. He needed interpreters prepared to get under the skin of the drama in a way more familiar to theatre and cinema than ballet.

Of no ballet is this truer than *Anastasia*. On Thursday the Royal Ballet revives his most ambitious work, and his most painful flop. When MacMillan died the last plan he had mentioned was to revise the piece, hoping it would at last find the public acclaim it failed to win 25 years ago.

The story of Anna Anderson, a patient in a Berlin asylum who claimed to be Anastasia, the youngest daughter of Tsar Nicholas, believed murdered by Bolsheviks in 1917, consumed MacMillan, who returned to it again and again. On the surface it slots easily into his canon of big historical stories: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon*, *Mayerling*. But *Anastasia* was perhaps his most bruised, personal work. It was the product of some of the bitterest years of his life, a story of which he made two versions, and might have made three if he had lived.

Its genesis was his fascination with an outsider whose belief in herself was persistently denied by a hostile, disbelieving world. As Lady MacMillan says of her husband "He was always intrigued by the outsider, felt that he was one himself."

MacMillan made the first version of *Anastasia* in Berlin in 1967. He had accepted the

directorship of the Berlin Ballet feeling, says Lady MacMillan, “very unhappy” about what appeared to be the triumph of his first full-length ballet at Covent Garden, *Romeo and Juliet*, in 1965.

He had created it for his muse, the ballerina Lynn Seymour, yet the Royal Ballet had insisted on making it a star vehicle for Fonteyn and Nureyev. Seymour, whose marriage had broken down, went with him to Berlin, but both of them hated being there.

“Berlin in 1967 wasn’t a nice place to be,” says Lady MacMillan (who had not met her husband at the time). “He didn’t go into it much with me, he just said he was very unhappy there. He began to drink heavily, became an alcoholic because of loneliness and anxiety. Then he had a stroke at only 39.”

While in Berlin he read the story of Anna Anderson, a Berlin psychiatric patient who was either grandly deluded or tragically misunderstood - and he created a one-act *Anastasia* ballet in an expressionist style more reminiscent of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* painting than classical ballet.

It was hugely successful there, and when MacMillan returned to London to succeed Frederick Ashton as the Royal Ballet’s director, he set about expanding *Anastasia* into a full-length work, with two acts showing Anastasia’s early royal life. He emphasised the difference between the Russian acts and the “mad” act musically by offsetting the final Martinu with Tchaikovsky symphonies.

Several critics found its audacity verging on brilliant. Those who found it broken-backed, however, were vociferous. MacMillan sank into depression and entered a three-year period of psychoanalysis.

Lady MacMillan, who met him during this period, says, “He believed till the day he died that dance could express anything at all, from classical strength to dramatic strength. But I think in those days the Royal Ballet was still asserting itself, and he was perceived as a real threat to what people thought was the English way in ballet. But he adored the classics, particularly *Sleeping Beauty*, and it upset him that people said he was tearing it all down.’

What no one could deny, though, was his unerring ability to tell the truth about the most extreme feelings through the artifice of ballet.

THE work was the culmination of the devastating partnership between MacMillan and his ballerina Lynn Seymour. From the tomboyish 12-year-old of Act I to Act 3’s disbelieved woman with a memory full of horrors, the dramatic range of Seymour permeates the part of Anastasia.

Lady MacMillan saw her perform many times. “Lynn is probably the best thing that I have seen on a theatre stage anywhere, ever. Her performance was always so acute, so dangerous, so organic, that I forgot that this was a theatre, a set, that she was on point. She was prepared to die on stage every single time.”

Seymour gave her final performance of *Anastasia Act III* in 1989 for Peter Schaufuss’s English National Ballet, and this last act remains the litmus test not only of three ballerinas’ abilities but of the revivability of the ballet itself.

She herself has been coaching the three ballerinas who will take part in this revival - Viviana Durante, Leanne Benjamin and Sarah Wildor. What has concerned her most is that they find a spontaneous way under the skin of this tremendous creation, and do not “fall into clichés” and “horrible banalities”. One of the pas de deux shows her being forced to abandon her baby in order to save her own life and it will be a test of the dancers’ abilities to make it seem true rather than melodramatic.

She recommended that they read Anna Anderson’s famous book, *I, Anastasia*, but says that fundamentally, “You can just imagine it - that was Kenneth’s approach.”

That is perhaps what makes Lady MacMillan's burden so exactly. There are two other MacMillan ballets being revived this week; *My Brother, My Sisters* at English National Ballet and *Solitaire* at London City Ballet. Like *Anastasia* they depend on the imaginative and emotional commitment of their performers. It was just such emotional commitment on the part of the Royal Ballet's Bolshoi defector Irek Mukhamedov that inspired MacMillan to think about once again revising his "problem child" *Anastasia*. He had intended to expand the part of Rasputin from a character cameo in the ballet into a major dramatic focus. But he died too soon, and we cannot know what he would have done.

Lady MacMillan says, "Irek and Kenneth did have an amazing rapport, and I think Kenneth would have taken dance from the other characters to give to him. But we just couldn't carry it out. I don't know what exactly was in his mind, and it would have had to mean bringing in another choreographer."

Mukhamedov will not be in this revival, then, and it remains an incomplete realisation of Kenneth MacMillan's last wish. Nevertheless his widow hopes that, unlike the real Anna Anderson, *Anastasia* will be accepted on its own terms at last.

Anastasia opens at Covent Garden on Thurs. Tickets 0171 304 4000