

STRENGTH AND SUBTLETY



PHOTO: Sasha Gusov

Ismene Brown meets the Royal Ballet's Irek Mukhamedov as he comes to terms with some unwelcome news

**"Dancing is my life,
it brings satisfaction
at every level.
I always want to be
true on stage, to
bring life there"**

Irek Mukhamedov's thighs are the most discussed thighs in British ballet, and they were there right in front of me, sheathed in blue jeans, solid, meaty, Michelangelo thighs. There is no getting away from it: Irek Mukhamedov makes British male dancers look like vegan chickens.

When the Bolshoi Ballet's leading man defected in 1990, he injected much-needed brawn into the Royal Ballet. He was, then, the Jean-Claude Van Damme of dance, word-famous as Spartacus, the half-naked hero of the Bolshoi's most exciting ballet. All that packed beef looked highly impressive as it shot into the air, spun several times, hung around a little, then landed not with the seismic shudder one expected but with a soft, disciplined plop.

But there was more to Mukhamedov than muscles, as Kenneth MacMillan and Anthony Dowell, choreographer and director of the Royal Ballet, suspected. Though his virile power was needed in London, he proved to have an unexpectedly daring dramatic soul, and became a powerful stimulant to MacMillan's complex ballets in his last years. After MacMillan's sudden death, Mukhamedov branched off again, into the classical princes, with a velvet romanticism and natural nobility that his Bolshoi life had never exposed.

He forged two memorable partnerships: briefly with the great Lesley Collier at the end of her career ("If only she had been 10 years younger," he says sadly), and, in depth, with Viviana Durante, a pairing with a sex appeal not seen since Nureyev and Fonteyn.

And now Mukhamedov is 38, and this week he was coming to terms with the unwelcome news that after his Royal Ballet contract expires this summer he will become a guest artist - semi-detached, the first step to retirement.

The loss will be enormous. This man could never wisecrack that ballet is just a job, as the Royal's ballerina Darcey Bussell did, or that it can be a bore, as the Kirov's star Igor Zelensky did. "Classical ballet bubbles your blood, bubbles your brain, sharpens your whole body," Mukhamedov said to me, and "dancing is my life, it brings satisfaction at every level. I always want to be true on stage, to bring life there."

Ayt the Bolshoi he lived, as he admitted in Jeffrey Taylor's racy 1994 biography, a fairly meretricious life off and on stage. But in England "I learned to think", and the British public - "they understand ballet much better than the Russian public" - recognised that this man had a bigness of range in his dancing that they simply hadn't seen before. He was explosively exciting and virtuosic, like a heroic tenor with all the high Cs, but he had deeper, darker, baritone qualities: musicality, depth, thoughtfulness, the ability to stare into a detail and open up a universe of feeling.

"Irek is the last true star and romantic hero that we've got," says choreographer Ashley Page, who is making his fifth ballet for the Russian, to show at the Royal Ballet's Barbican season in June.

"I see something different in him from anything I've ever seen, of whatever nationality. It's a sense of easy power. With his bulk you are surprised how fast and nimble he is, and on top of this he has incredible joy and passion in his roles. Like Baryshnikov, there's a daring that's counterbalanced with refinement.

"And he still has it. Last summer when we were in Los Angeles I saw him do a rehearsal for *Don Quixote*, and the way he flew around the studio, he just woke us all up - there was a hush at the end of it. That rehearsal showed just how amazing he can be, soundless, huge, megafast."

But several other men are pretty fast too - the Royal Ballet is stronger in men now than women. What makes Mukhamedov superior is his humility, his gentlemanly behaviour with ballerinas, the way he understands the living link between the aesthetic conventions of ballet and true feeling, even in a fairy story.

"You know, somebody made up that fairy story from something real in life," he commented. "Maybe it's the schooling I had. To put your emotions through your body, through your fingers. Not just to go, I-Love-You", and he mimed the three classic gestures, "but to finish the phrase through the fingers, the whole body, eyes, even lips. Then it's not just signs - the audience will

understand what I am saying."

Having watched Mukhamedov mime undying love dozens of times on stage, it's fairly pulverising to experience at first hand. He is exceptionally handsome, much handsomer than his new Russian rival at the Royal, Igor Zelensky, whose qualities are similar - only taller, slenderer and 10 years younger.

This summer the two men will be joining battle royal in the Royal Ballet's Coliseum season in July, performing the same ballets. Their partnerships will also be minutely compared: the tall, elegant Zelensky and Bussell, the shorter, fierier Mukhamedov and Durante.

"It is difficult for me to criticise other dancers and say I am better," said Mukhamedov, as we sat in a mirrored ballet studio smelling strongly of feet, "but I presume the performances will say. He is doing *Manon*, I am doing *Manon*, I like competition." He added, "Now my life is always a competition.

"At the beginning with the Royal Ballet it was perfect; the middle was incredible - then suddenly it stopped. I'm not saying I'm forgotten, but something was lost. You know, when you have such a good time, people hold you up and carry you over the crowd, and you want more. But when you are walking in the crowd, it's different."

The Royal Ballet and his family are the two poles of his emotional life; his devotion to both is a lesson to all, but he said he would survive losing the Royal Ballet as long as he has his second wife Masha and their children, Sasha, seven (who has just given up ballet) and Maxim, two.

As Baryshnikov and Nureyev found before him, even the greatest dancers risk credibility when they try to extend their careers past the conventional retiring age. But they made themselves more globally marketable than Mukhamedov. He has been solidly loyal to the Royal Ballet during his peak years, and nowadays his name tends not to attract praise of his artistry so much as bitching about his size.

He is 5ft 10in tall, slighter off stage than one expects but not a wand like most ballet man. On stage his chunky buttocks do rather draw the eye. Last year they cost him the goodwill of the powerful Balanchine Foundation, causing the Royal Ballet's embarrassing last-minute cancellation of Balanchine's *Apollo*.

"Some critics abroad... they do take the - rude word - take the piss about me, how I am fat. I take it like a correction, like a good student. I know, ballet is aesthetic. You don't want to see a Hercules on stage. If I dance Hercules, then okay, but if I do a prince, I have to look like a prince. But it's not completely up to me. I can become anorexic, but please give me more shows so I can become anorexic quicker. Rather than sit at home and think, hmmm, you big thing, don't eat - when will I have a performance?"

How much does Hercules weigh? "My best is 75 kilograms, baddest is 80 kilograms" - about 12 st. Russian training, he pointed out, favours diversity among men and uniformity among women. In England he sees the opposite, he snapped.

"I know it's wrong to say this, but here it doesn't matter how girls look as long as the boys are tall and thin. I see many girls here not quite correct to be a dancer - in Russia they would never even be accepted into the company. Only bribery."

How did it feel doing class with these tall, thin young men? He was instantly on his mettle.

"Well, on some points I know I can do better than those young dancers. Maybe not if some young Russian dancer will come, but with ours, maybe I will not do so many pirouettes but I will do them better. Jumps - maybe they will do one jump higher than me, but I will do the rest of it better."

And what is the rest of it? "You know at the Bolshoi, when I did *Spartacus*, the older generation would say to me, 'What's going on here? We're not doing sport here, we're doing art.' Now I find myself saying the same thing.

"It's not just to jump, but to jump with the pose. Not just to turn, but to turn with the shape; not just to stand in arabesque but to MAKE the arabesque. To show myself, as if on a golden plate. To make the correct position - and not just standing on the earth, hanging in the air."

The Royal Ballet at the Barbican June 15-20; at the Coliseum July 7-August 1