

Daily Telegraph Aug 2000

The girl who defied gravity



English National Ballet Archive

Fifty years after founding Festival Ballet, Alicia Markova remains one of the greatest figures in the history of dance. Ismene Brown discovers why

**“I always
thought that
ballet was
modern. I
wasn’t afraid”**

DAME Alicia Markova, 89, is readying herself for her photograph. “How do you want me?” she asks. Her tiny hands flutter around her face. “Do you want me alive, or....?” her hands droop in repose. Alive, I should say so. This woman will be 90 in December, yet she darts about her flat as swiftly as a wren, arranging herself for the photographer - one minute dignified by her mantelpiece, under one of many portraits of her, another minute sprightly perched on her window-seat, with knee drawn casually up and ramrod-straight back.

She pulls up a black trouser-leg for me to see her calf and foot - they could have been drawn by a silken nib, so soft are their lines, the little foot size 2 and a half, only ever shod by Salvatore Ferragamo, personally. “See?” she says proudly. “And I had eight performances a week and travel on Sundays for... well, you know how many decades I danced.”

As she chatters matter-of-factly away in a voice that has never lost its North London accent, I’m reflecting: This is Alicia Markova, the living legend of - well, I was going to say British ballet, but in fact she is a living legend of 20th-century civilisation. This is the body that Matisse drew black squiggles down for his costume for her in ‘Rouge et Noir’. This skin was rubbed down by the immortal Pavlova with her personal eau de cologne. This musical mind was guided as a child by Stravinsky and Balanchine.

At 14 this girl was sent off by her apprehensive mother to Paris, summoned by the great impresario Serge Diaghilev to join the Ballets Russes, as a sort of speciality child in a company renowned for adult legends - Nijinsky, Karsavina, Spessivtseva, Fokine. Little Lily

Marks could do double turns in the air - no other woman could, it was a male feat. Diaghilev adored her.

In the wings she would hand a shawl to the great, silent, disturbed ballerina Olga Spessivtseva, between acts in *Giselle*, the ballet that Spessivtseva virtually owned. Before long, though, Spessivtseva was insane, and surrendered the mantle of *Giselle* to the girl from Finsbury Park (and longtime Arsenal supporter), who for 20 years reigned supreme in the unearthly roles.

“They always think of me now with the little wings,” says Dame Alicia, her round brown eyes fixed sharply on me, flapping her hands behind her waist. “But I was Jekyll and Hyde.”

This year people are celebrating the Jekyll side of Markova - the solid, establishment side, represented by her founding of the Festival Ballet 50 years ago on Monday, now the English National Ballet. A grand gala will be held at the London Coliseum next winter to mark the double birthdays of company and founder.

In 1950 she and her lifelong partner Anton Dolin - the exotic *nom de danse* for the Irishman, Pat Healey-Kay - decided that Britain needed a first-class touring ballet company to complement the London-based Sadler’s Wells Ballet of Ninette de Valois.

“There were all these talented dancers here who didn’t have any work. And we knew so many great dancers, [Léonide] Massine, [Alexandra] Danilova, [Yvette] Chauviré, and we knew they all had a great public in London. So Pat thought if we have a company, we can invite them here as guests, and it won’t take much rehearsal because we are all more or less trained in the same way and all know the same ballets.”

The company began touring on August 14, at the King’s Theatre, Southsea - Markova had appendicitis and could not dance. She had recovered for the London debut of Festival Ballet in October at the Stoll Theatre, Drury Lane - rehearsing *The Nutcracker* while wearing a mink coat and black suede high heels. Popular classics were always the core repertoire, pivoting on new productions of *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker*. Markova can’t remember how many *Giselles* she danced - “it must be hundreds” - before her last, when she was 48.

But as she says, she is Jekyll and Hyde. The Jekyll side is the Dame, the Festival Ballet founder, the still active teacher, patron and competition adjudicator. In the authorised versions, the memoirs and biographies, her career is as smoothly marvellous as a pebble, difficulties and mechanics hidden or glossed over - rather like her dancing. The Hyde side, however, is more intriguing.

THE Hyde side, artistically, was the open, inquisitive mind of a prodigious child who was not afraid to try new things. What’s also intriguing is the real, tough career-woman inside the mink-lined myth. Markova never married, and never admitted to being in love with anything or anybody other than ballet. She is also credited as the first to demand high fees, knowing her worth very well.

There is a superb vignette in Julie Kavanagh’s biography of Frederick Ashton, *Secret Muses*, where Markova, the celebrated 25-year-old star, tells Ashton that she’s leaving Sadler’s Wells to form her own company, and turns down his new ballet. He recalled acidly, “She thought she couldn’t stoop to do my little things... I don’t know if under my breath I said, ‘F*** you, that’s the end’, but that’s what it was... Her utter pretension.” And when she left, he told her petulantly: “I’m going to take Margot and make her much greater than you ever were.”

It was “like a family,” Markova tells me smoothly. But in Thirties Britain, I would think Markova had every reason to be grand. Diaghilev’s death in 1929 hit her hard, and after

Paris and Monte Carlo the reach-me-down stages of Britain's embryonic companies must have been frustrating.

She was a marvel, after all. The American choreographer Agnes de Mille once described Markova's dancing: "She had inordinately long arms and legs... Her arabesque was more fragile, aerial and brilliant than anyone else's. Possibly because of the almost double-jointedness of her hip and back. It invariably brought the shock of delight one inevitably experiences from the high E of a great coloratura... Her technique was bolts of lightning and steel. However, she seemed to laymen to float in a mist, and they remained wonderstruck."

I think of the steady, subsidised but staid companies that evolved out of the bolts of lightning and harsh realities of the past. Markova replies: "Things like TV change people. The public's world has different things in it now. And dancers have to go and battle on the bus or tube. They don't have, how can I say?... fantasy. But they could have."

She says she tries to reawaken that sense of fantasy in the student dancers she teaches, sending them hunting in libraries for facts and pictures to bring life to steps that to her need no explaining. This is Hyde again: the modernist Markova.

"I always thought ballet was modern. I wasn't afraid. You know, I still haven't found a small girl who can do the double turns in the air that I did," she adds in her soft bird's voice.

I ask her which ballerinas today she likes: "Sylvie," says the Dame. Sylvie Guillem, the guest star at the Royal Ballet whose stellar, independent career echoes that of Markova.

She tells me delightedly about her visit backstage after Guillem premiered the controversial revival of *Marguerite and Armand*, Ashton's ballet for Fonteyn and Nureyev, at Covent Garden last spring.

"Sylvie comes rushing towards me and picks me up in her arms, lifts me right up! I hug her, and we go, French fashion, kiss-kiss. I hadn't seen her in I don't know how long. And she said to me, 'Was it all right?' And I said, 'Very all right.' And Anthony Dowell," she adds mischievously, "he was like this..." her jaw drops. Even 55 years apart in age, ballerinas of the *premier cru* understand each other.