

The nightingale dances again



Photo Alastair Muir

A ballet that brought together four of the greatest artistic names of the early 20th century was thought lost forever. Now, thanks to Dame Alicia Markova's remarkable memory, it will live again, says Ismene Brown

TONIGHT, thanks to an old lady's prodigious memory, the lost Opus 1 of the 20th century's greatest choreographer will be recreated in London, nearly 70 years after its last performance. Designed by Matisse, composed by Stravinsky, produced by Diaghilev and choreographed by Balanchine, *Le Chant du rossignol* had a genesis of almost unbelievable glamour.

It was the official debut in the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo of both the 21-year-old choreographer and Diaghilev's new discovery, the 14-year-old North London prodigy Alicia Markova, who danced the captive nightingale.

Two of Balanchine's Diaghilev ballets, *Apollo* and *The Prodigal Son*, are performed to this day, but nothing was left of the rest of his early output except photographs and anecdotes.

Three months ago, a former Balanchine dancer and now historian, the American Nancy Reynolds, set up a \$1.7million project to track down the creators of as many of Balanchine's ballets as possible and build up a video archive of his work.

Since the survivors are now elderly, Ms Reynolds expected no more than the memory of steps here and there. But then she read a comment by Dame Alicia that she could remember the choreographer of her role in *Rossignol*, 66 years after she performed it last, aged 18.

"I didn't really believe it," said a delighted Nancy Reynolds, "but now I do, now I'm actually seeing Dame Alicia recreating it. She's known for her fantastic memory, but this is a simply extraordinary historical coup."

This week Markova has been teaching her steps to a 19-year-old Royal Ballet School graduate from Johannesburg, Iohna Loots. Tonight it's hoped that Loots will perform the entire solo for the camera, and posterity.

This is more than a researcher's dream, it is a balletic revelation too. For the reconstruction hints that the typical "Balanchine ballerina", with her gymnastic legs and provocative hips, springs directly from the choreographer's collaboration with the 14-year-old Markova.

The 1925 costume designed by Matisse was a white silk bodysuit, which on a child and in Paris did not look immodest; but by 1927, when Markova was two years older and the ballet was performed in London, there was consternation about its revealingness, and Matisse had to add a pair of pyjamas.

Markova remembers bursting into tears in the studio on meeting Balanchine, a Russian who spoke no English - and finding herself faced with Stravinsky's dissonant, difficult music. "I thought I'd be sent straight back home to England," she said this week.

Stravinsky himself resuced a potential disaster. "He had children himself and he was very kind. He said to me, 'Don't count, just listen to the instruments and the music'. After that it was easy. So I only had to hear the music again and the steps are just *there*, in the music."

Nancy Reynolds does not expect to reconstruct the entire 20-minute ballet, but she hopes Markova may now remember the amazing *pas de deux* written for herself as the Nightingale and Lydia Sokolova as Death, which was the climax of the work.