

The thistledown queen



Photo Robbie Jack

Ismene Brown meets the legendary ballerina Natalia Makarova as she prepares for an acting role

"It's perfection that you work for. It never comes, but at least you know your goal"

IF EVER a ballerina approached the ideal image, it is Natalia Makarova. It was her signal ability to look like a piece of thistledown on stage, who, if the cavalier was not tethering her firmly with his hand, would surely fly up and away, that made Makarova into what is vulgarly known as a living legend.

At 58 she is still tiny and slender, with long, perfectly shaped legs and arms, carried haughtily on a body as bendy as a snake. But hearing her talk, one is well aware that this fairy-like woman, who smiles so often and enchants so easily, is not at all what she seems.

No one could be who has done what she did. On September 4 1970 she was having a night off from starring in the Kirov Ballet's London tour. The Soviet minders were at the Festival Hall. She was having dinner with English friends. She decided to defect. She rang Scotland Yard, and that was it.

"It was the spur of the moment. I would never have the courage if I had thought about it," she says feelingly, a spun-glass figure perched on a formal sofa among drawings and photographs of an illustrious past and present in her Mayfair flat. In many of them she is wearing glittering turbans, which have become almost a trademark; but now she is showing her fine, soft, blonde hair. She speaks, as she danced, with an exotic, compelling Russian accent and a shadow behind the gaiety.

"It was London I wanted to come to. My first international success was here, *Giselle*, in 1961. All I remember though is the theatre and the hunger. *God*, I remember the hunger. They didn't pay us. We only had a few dollars a day and it was hard to eat on tour."

If she didn't eat, I reflect, she would be like a little bit of string. Some photographs on the coffee table show her in the studio, as she is today. She keeps on working, doing a daily class even now when she no longer dances.

"It's perfection you are working for - which never comes, but at least you know your goal. My extension is

not like Sylvie's [Guillem]... well," she goes on, a little proudly, "to front and side I still have it, but not at the back. it's softer than Sylvie's." If she stopped doing class, she says, she "would fall apart".

It is misleading to imagine that opportunities and starring roles simply fell into the outstretched hands of the great defectors. Several gifted Soviet artists failed in the West. Makarova's defection was unhappily timed. She was 30, the age of Britain's finest crop of ballerinas - Lynn Seymour, Antoinette Sibley, Lesley Collier. A change of directors at the Royal Ballet from Frederick Ashton to Kenneth MacMillan was taking place, and she did not find a warm endorsement from Rudolf Nureyev. For him, her defection had ruined his hopes of getting his family out of the USSR.

As near-contemporaries - she was two years younger than he - they were expected to become a new dream team, but it was not to be. On one occasion he felled her accidentally during a *Swan Lake* performance; her protests made headlines across the world. And jealousy in another quarter stood between Makarova and a stellar career at the Royal Ballet.

"It has been both pleasures and disappointments, the West for me. The opportunities were not quite as free as I had hoped. I expected an invitation from the Royal Ballet to join, but the ballerinas rebelled and said they would go away if the administration took on Makarova. Of course, probably the ballerinas had suffered enough of that kind under Fonteyn, so they didn't need me. I was so scared. I thought I would die.

"And then American Ballet Theater invited me straight away, so that's why I became American," she smiles.

In fact, by 1972 Makarova had taken her rightful place at the Royal Ballet in a sort of Sylvie Guillem role. As principal guest artist she danced the dramatic MacMillan roles such as Juliet and Manon, in which her classical refinement and surging emotionalism found a memorable fit - as, indeed, they did with Anthony Dowell, who was her finest partner, she says. "We had such chemistry. He's so strong." Mikhail Baryshnikov, her great partner when she went to ABT, told me regretfully in an interview that he knew she preferred Dowell to him on stage, because "she liked a man who could hold her with two fingers".

ANOTHER fascinating marriage of opposites between English man and Russian woman has brought her back to England from San Francisco, where she lives with her husband, businessman Edward Karkar, and a son of 21. On Sunday Makarova portrays another star Russian ballerina, the brilliant Diaghilev dancer Lydia Lopokova, who married the leading economist John Maynard Keynes, and became an unlikely feature of the Bloomsbury set.

The play, *Wooing in Absence*, made by Patrick Garland from the pair's intimate correspondence, is being done at Charleston Farmhouse at Lewis in Sussex, where the Keyneses spent much time with Virginia Woolf and that circle.

What makes this marriage so intriguing is partly that he was so brainy and she was so girlishly fluffy, and partly that he was generally considered homosexual, yet their letters reveal a highly sexed relationship.

"Lydia was like champagne, always bubbling, the opposite of Keynes, but opposition often makes a happy marriage," Makarova observes, "and she really expresses the physical side in a very amusing way. She ends this letter to him, 'So before I close my buttons, in both spirit and body I say good night to you'.

"And he sent this poem to her, early Babylonian, written by a woman 2000 years before Christ: 'Come to me, my Ishtar, and show your virile strength, Push out your member and touch with it my little place'."

Lopokova, she says delicately, was not the ultimate of Diaghilev's ballerinas, who included Pavlova, Spessivtseva and Karsavina - but she was the most infectiously lovable. Only she got away with nicknaming him 'Big Serge'. Irresistible she may have been, but Lopokova was not beautiful. In fact, the reason Diaghilev's

legendary 1921 production was called *The Sleeping Princess* in England rather than *The Sleeping Beauty* was because he said he would be laughed to scorn if he cast her as Aurora and called her a beauty.

"You know, one thing I like so much is how well Lydia sometimes expresses herself, even though her English was not good. Once she describes the process of growing old - 'Every day a little bit of me flies away like a bird.'" And Makarova's hands flutter in the air, like the immortal Swan Queen that she will always be.