

## The truth about Sylvie



Photo Alastair Muir

### ***Sylvie Guillem is famous for her legs and her temperament. But as Ismene Brown finds, beneath the extravagance the ballerina is curiously shy***

"SHE COULD kill a man with a blow of her leg," Jeremy Isaacs once said of her. No one could doubt whom he was talking about. The joke did not entirely hide the fear.

Sylvie Guillem is like no other ballerina the Royal Opera House has ever had to deal with. She is not only visibly tough, with the thighs and knees of an urchin boy, but fierce and peremptory about her independence. She is a permanent guest at the Royal Ballet, but not a member of it. It's an unusual, not to say unique arrangement for this august institution where company values reign supreme.

The body, of course, is the most talked-about aspect. Guillem has become, notoriously, the Six O'Clock show, her bare legs a plumb line, her feet audacious hooks at each end of it. Her reputation as a physical prodigy has won her a global profile unmatched since that of Fonteyn, if far more controversial.

Dancers copy her now, as earlier generations copied Fonteyn. But what they tend to copy is those high legs, which her detractors condemn as "unnatural", but which are, obviously, the gift of nature. A few years ago, the ballet critic Clement Crisp protested that her 180 degree extension had become "a means of identification rather than a truth".

The truth is that in the flesh, Sylvie Guillem is certainly a shock, but not by any means the shock you are expecting.

On stage she is witchy and seductive - so flash and so exact that your eyes are pinned helplessly to her. Yet in curtain calls, unlike Fonteyn, who continued the stage fiction as she accepted her bouquets, Guillem drops the star act, looks really pleased that the audience liked her, wants them to cheer her colleagues too. She seems suddenly an ordinary girl made extraordinary by fluke.

It was so, when we met. She looked extravagant, 100-percent-proof diva, swathed in the blond skins of several sheep, her oxblood hair cascading over them; yet she turned out to be clever and shy, with beautiful manners, and a notable appreciation of others' talent.

She has made some unusual dance films for television, featuring choreographers and performers whom she admires, William Forsythe, Mats Ek and the Englishman Jonathan Burrows among them. She dances in only two of the five works, though the films are packaged in an almost voyeuristic sequence of camera close-ups on the Guillem body at work.

Why is she not in all the pieces? Didn't she ask the choreographers to make things for her?

"Well, no, otherwise I would not 'ave done this film," she answers in her very French accent. "All the people I contacted, I said, it's your talent that I like, and I trust, and I want you to do what *you* want to do. It would be ridiculous for me to go and say, use me, as Sylvie Guillem, because if they don't want it, they don't feel like it... it's ridiculous." The low voice sank even lower.

Ridiculous? Any choreographer alive would surely kill to get into Guillem's address book, wouldn't they? Apparently, it's not so simple.

"No, choreographers are not easy to find, and when you find them it's not easy to work. They are not free, or they 'ave somesing else to do, or they do not know you enough, many reasons. You know, the first man, and almost the only one, I had no problem to work with, is Maurice Bejart. You would think that with the name he has, with the fame he has, it's difficult to work with him. But when he likes someone, he's ready to work with all 'is generosity, and it's difficult to find it somewhere else. You contact young choreographers and they say, well, I want this, that, this money. And you say, wait a minute, I just want to work with you... But it's already a question of money.

"Also they are scared about what you represent. I have the classical image; they don't see what they could

do with you, and your reputation makes them... step backwards a bit, because the image is so clear what you are, what people *think* you are, that they don't imagine that you yourself are ready to make a big step forward to go and to learn something. It's much more with *humility* that I go, than they receive me. Except with a few rare exceptions."

I was taken aback by the nakedness of her disappointment. The great dancers seek choreographers to immortalise them in ballets; Fonteyn had Ashton, Seymour had MacMillan, Farrell had Balanchine. Guillem has not found her match, and creations are plainly the vehicles for a voyage of quite painful self-discovery. Her legendary aloofness, her long refusal to make herself available for publicity - now thawing - is more defensive than self-important. The huge coat, the hefty boots on those whip-thin legs, had the look of armour, as much as an expensive badge of status.

She was brought up largely by her grandmother, while her parents lived nearby. She did not expand, but it sounds less than ideal, and her comment that if she had children she would not allow someone else to look after them reinforced the impression. At some point Guillem said quietly, "My parents don't recognise me." She meant, I took it, that they have not yet come to terms with the scale of their daughter's achievement.

"They never could imagine it. Especially if you knew me before. I was a very shy kid. It was really pure instinct that I became... what I became. Nobody could imagine that I would put one foot on stage. I had to go through a lot of difficulties against myself to be able to do that.

"It's true that when you have a technique and a step, you can just do that, hide in the steps. But what is interesting and what moves *me* is to go beyond that. Step by step, I learned that I could put a lot of myself and yet at the same time *live* on stage, give some emotion, and discover *me*. I could know what I had inside, what I could give..." It appears that more than just her body aches.

Jonathan Burrows, who created one of the filmed works *Blue Yellow*, says it is this emotional curiosity as much as her physicality that distinguishes her from other ballet dancers.

"Sylvie has a great trust of the choreographer, which is very rare among dancers. In other words, she will trust or commit to what the choreographer's doing, without fear, or certainly without showing fear, of how it may affect her. Many ballet dancers are afraid because they spend their lives training to look beautiful, and they're afraid of being made to look ugly."

GUILLEM evidently enjoys the extremes of her body - she told me with relish that when someone invited Fonteyn to condemn young Sylvie's split legs, Dame Margot said if she could have done it, she would have. "And it was quite... *pleasant* to hear it from her, because mostly people talk for others, they were talking for Margot, saying that it should be like this because Margot did it like this. But maybe Margot did not think that."

The truth is that at the core of Guillem's dancing, under the awesome exhibition, is a rigorous honesty - whether it pleases everyone or not.

This is partly why she enjoys classical roles - they are "*l'erve*" stories. Last summer, she danced with the Kirov Ballet in a piece of harem kitsch - and yet when Guillem danced, you saw simply a woman in unrequited love. She adores *Giselle* and *Manon* but has difficulties with *Swan Lake*. "I still didn't find the way to imagine that I can be a swan and a woman and be in *l'erve* with a man who calls, like 'Taxi!', and you arrive." Her longtime partner, the fashion photographer Gilles Tapie presumably lets her hail the cabs.

She also has an impressive respect for the classics. First, she says, the classical technique is the "structure" that she needs before she can adventure into modernism (Adam Cooper, one of her Royal Ballet partners, says she works in ballet class at a constant pitch every day, unlike others whose workrate depends on whether they are performing). But aesthetically too, as "the *patrimoine*. It's like plays: you have new writers with new ideas, but you still have Shakespeare. And I think it's nice to go back to the past, because it's a way of living in the past - at the same time, of making the people dream. But what I do is also a *divertissement*. I am a dancer, and dance is a *divertissement* - you say, an entertainment. To dance *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* is part of that."

She had been kept from drinking her tea by the talking, yet at the end of our hour she protested quietly that no, she did not need fresh tea, look, the pot was still warm. Later Adam Cooper told me that when they performed Forsythe's *Herman Schmerman* together, in which he wore a tiny yellow skirt, she would urge him to take off his flesh-coloured underpants and give the audience some real bottom. Both the tea and the rudery, like Jeremy Isaacs' joke, show a truth about Sylvie Guillem.