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Viviana Durante – darling of dance fans – is cutting her links with the Royal Ballet. She tells **Ismene Brown** why

Farewell for now, Viviana

VIVIANA DURANTE's toes are all one length. The tiny foot looks chopped off at the end, a perfect isosceles triangle. "Perfect for pointework," she says happily, wiggling her gnarled tootsies. But there are many other things about Durante that make her perfect for pointework.

During the 1990s Britain's Italian ballerina made a divine double-act at the Royal Ballet with Darcey Bussell, the silvery, tempestuous moon to Bussell's calm, golden sun. Like Snow White and Rose Red, they grew up together, complementarily, competitively, a year apart in age, both promoted to the top rank at indecently young ages, Bussell at 20, Durante at 21.

Thereafter, while tall Bussell honed her robust majesty and rosy simplicity, little Durante became not only an exquisitely melancholy Giselle but, for many, the ideal Kenneth MacMillan ballerina, rifling through the lingerie drawers of emotion to bring us his troubling visions of woman: sleazy Manon, tortured Anastasia, damaged Marie Vetsera, and the brutal role made for her in *The Judas Tree*, in which she was simultaneously Mary Magdalene and a victim of murderous gang rape.

But now it's farewell, Viviana — for the foreseeable future. Thousands of ballet fans are in mourning: her performance as Manon on April 4 is the last at the Royal Ballet for the rest of the year. Maybe next year... but who knows? Durante is disinclined to make plans that far ahead.

"I don't like being fixed," she says in a soft, rapid little voice, nestling comfortably in a giant sofa in her huge white flat in London's Little Venice. "I don't like feeling as if I'm just stuck in one place."

At 32, she cuts an elfin, glamorous figure, tossing her dark hair about over a scarlet twin-set and

child-sized jeans. She smokes, drinks, drives fast cars, has a screechy laugh and terrific, movie-star eyebrows. For five years she has formed one of the stage's power couples, living with the award-winning theatre director David Leveaux.

They catch each other between flights. He is currently in New York staging his brilliant West End production of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*. Last night she was in Nottingham in a modern dance work by Wayne McGregor. This summer it's Tokyo, in Roland Petit's *Carmen* with K Ballet, the company of men formed by six Royal Ballet dancers under her old flame Tetsuya Kumakawa. "I have so much fun with them — I tell you, they are like the Beatles in Japan. I can't wait for them to get invited here."

Surprisingly, she turned down prestigious engagements with American Ballet Theatre in New York — where she is adored — to join K Ballet. ("I'm thirsty to do new things, and this *Carmen* is new to me".) After that comes *Sleeping Beauty* in Naples in the autumn. Will the Royal Ballet get into the Durante diary again?

"I don't know what will happen," she says, carefree, unworried. Last year there was a famous falling out, when she was summarily dropped on the eve of the Royal Ballet's Japanese tour for rowing with her scheduled leading man, Bruce Sanson. Ugly scenes followed, with Durante heatedly condemning the director, Sir Anthony Dowell, and Dowell issuing icy statements about "reconsidering" the relationship with the ballerina.

"Oh well, that's gone by the board, hasn't it?" she laughs. "Funny how people say one thing and do another... I think it was handled appallingly, and I won't forget it." And Durante, already distancing herself from the com-

pany, hardened her resolve to set her own terms. Until last year she had little say in who she danced with. "I have more choice now."

Durante, it becomes clear, has done what until recently very few Royal Ballet stars dared to — she has forced her company to regard her differently. She was born in Rome, but raised from the age of 11 within the Royal Ballet organisation. By the early 1990s she was MacMillan's best girl, soaring on the back of her fabled partnership with the outstanding Russian Irek Mukhamedov.

But MacMillan died in 1992, and Durante found herself becoming the workhorse of the Royal Ballet. Through the mid-1990s, she seemed at times to be the only ballerina holding the company together, as Bussell was laid up with injury or partner trouble. In 1995 she was always in the papers, unhappy, rebellious, telling how unappreciated she felt.

IN 1996 she quit "to smell the roses", she says. But the break helped her to rediscover her love for dancing. "I changed," she says. "Being outside ballet, I grew up a lot. I suddenly realised that I wanted to choose the work I was doing, go for what inspired me."

She returned as a guest artist, but could not quite achieve the autonomy that the dazzling Frenchwoman Sylvie Guillem insisted on for her own career — probably because Durante was one of the Royal Ballet's home-grown kids, and thus should know her place.

What anyone outside can see, though, is that Durante was a special case, because of her understanding with Mukhamedov. The sort of chemical bonding that occurred between them when MacMillan first put them together in *Manon* a decade ago is remarkably rare. In 25 years the Royal Ballet mustered two legendary

couples, Fonteyn and Nureyev and Sibley and Dowell. Undoubtedly the Durante-Mukhamedov partnership lit up the 1990s with something of the same explosive fire.

"Irek always has been and always will be my favourite partner," says Durante. "We do have some chemistry on stage which is really powerful. And I do think our partnership should have been more celebrated by the company. It is something special, and the public craves it. It allows people to dream — and that's what we're all looking for in life."

And yet, handed a new star partnership, the Royal Ballet didn't know quite how to handle it. Durante, for example, longed to dance in the recent revival of Fonteyn's signature ballet, Frederick Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*, but was told that only Guillem could do it. Durante talks sympathetically about the challenge to a director faced with demands from individuals and the company. Still, she says, dancers need to feel valued as adult artists, rather than company salaried men.

"It's not just the Royal Ballet — and I do believe they are a great company, by the way, I really do. I think it's the ballet world itself. In every company you tend to find people talking to you as if you are a little child, and you are actually expected to answer by being a child. And the minute you go against it, it's 'Goops — she's being difficult'. If ballet needs to change at all, it is in that area, she thinks, rather than the area of repertoire or "accessibility".

There will be tears and flowers galore from Durante's fans at *Manon* on April 4 — but surely it will be a case of *au revoir* rather than *adieu* to this much-loved artist. The most painful pang may be the fear that it will be 40-year-old Mukhamedov's last *Manon* — and the end of a partnership that really did bring dreams alive.



Picture: DAVID SCHEINMANN

Tempestuous: Durante brought true passion to the RB, above all opposite Irek Mukhamedov