



Stars feel the strain

The Royal Ballet is suffering an injury crisis. Is it bad luck, asks Ismene Brown, or the result of excessive demands on a few dancers?

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'DARCEY BUSSELL and Jonathan Cope were forced to pull out of the gala due to injury and their heavy schedule.' "Due to injury, Johan Persson and Inaki Urlezaga will not be dancing their scheduled roles." "X, replacing Leanne Benjamin, who is injured." These announcement and footnotes in programmes are signs of a Royal Ballet at dangerous pressure.

Last night, for the opening of Giselle at the Royal Opera House, the unthinkable had been on the cards - "Replacing Alina Cojocaru, who is injured." Cojocaru, the 21-year-old Russian-trained Romanian whom the new director Ross Stretton has turned into the Royal Ballet's leading star, was torn between doctor's advice to rest and her burning desire to consume every performance she was offered. In the event, she cancelled her

desire to consume every performance she was offered. In the event, she canceled no performances.

Marianela Nunez was not so lucky. The rising Argentinian starlet, 19, likely to join Cojocarú on principal rank at a very young age, has had to miss three big shows due to injury this past fortnight, and "it is hoped" she will be back next week.

There has been some speculation that dancers are being forced to pay a high price for suddenly learning a large range of ballets imported by Stretton - six months into the job, Stretton is already facing criticism of his taste, let alone his personnel management. A spokesman said he did not wish to comment on such speculation, but did admit that there are currently "more injuries than usual".

Recently, too, company principals have been talking about the conflict between ambition and stress which can lead dancers to drive themselves too hard.

French superstar Sylvie Guillem told me this week that she said no to dancing Giselle as well as Mats Ek's modern Carmen in the same month. She spoke of "the bulimics of ballet" who gobble up every role offered without taking time to digest them.

Recently, too, the brilliant leading man Johan Kobborg, 30, Cojocarú's chief partner at the Royal, complained openly at a public rehearsal about the overworking of the company, rehearsing too many different ballets at once for their health, and doing very long days at full stretch followed by performances in the evening. "Perhaps the Royal Ballet needs to have more dancers or to do fewer ballets," he said.

The male position is critical. Jonathan Cope, the only home-grown male star, who will be 40 this year, had to pull out of Dame Beryl Grey's gala last week. Darcey Bussell, his partner, was also injured. No other senior dancers could be substituted, according to the Royal Ballet, because of the threat of injury in a pressurised season.

Bussell and Cope are back on, but now two more leading men, Inaki Urlezaga and Johan Persson, are off with serious injuries. Persson will be out for the rest of the season, Urlezaga is out for two months.

This leaves only one dependably fit resident male, Kobborg, while the rising junior man, Nathan Coppen, is also fighting injury.

Among the women, the situation is hardly better. Bussell has a suspect foot, with a long history of injury, and Miyako Yoshida has a chronic back problem. Jane Burn and Belinda Hatley are both long-term injured, and may not be seen this season at all.

Well, dancers are always injured, you may say. This is true, up to a point. Like any athletes, they are always carrying little aches and strains that affect their performance.

But what is more worrying is the possibility that dancers are now feeling pushed to perform a range of work that is actually bad for them physically and which shortchanges them artistically. The danger is that the perception of ballet is becoming distorted, towards the belief that a very wide range of dance can be achieved at no great cost to the art.

In the push for the Royal Ballet to refresh its repertory, the public is hardly aware of the ever-increasing differences between choreographers' styles, and the punishment on different muscles and joints.

It is accepted that a soprano will not sing Wagner and Rossini in the same month because it is bad for her voice; consciousness is nowhere near as high that a dancer switching from a 19th-century classic such as Giselle to a late 20th-century modern flat-foot dance such as Mats Ek's Carmen the following week is doing something that may be equally bad for her body.

At the 81-strong Royal Ballet, the highest demands are made of a very small number of leading dancers. Visiting choreographers almost always choose the same top artists where previously most new choreography was by resident choreographers who knew who the rising youngsters were as well.

Analysis of dancer performances under Stretton reveals his marked preference for two dancers, in contrast to former Royal Ballet director Anthony Dowell's years, when shows were fairly evenly spread about principals. Astonishingly, Cojocar and Kobborg between them account for a third of all this season's 157 performances, home and abroad. Frequently cast as a partnership, and with a few dates still to be cast, it looks as though they will tally more than 50 performances each; much higher than the busiest schedules of any dancers under Dowell.

This may not be fully representative of Stretton's modus operandi - in his first season, he has inherited some leading dancers whom he does not favour.

He has also been installed with a mission to bring in modern world choreography, to sit alongside the ballets of the past two centuries. Even classical categories are not at all the same as each other. But this season's chosen choreographers are also not only wildly different from classical ballet, but from each other, too. It is akin to runners attempting sprints and cross-country running on the same schedule.

Indeed, a Royal Ballet spokesman said yesterday: "Yes, there are more injuries than usual, but this may be just unlucky. They are working bloody hard and they are tired, but they are enjoying the stimulation of the work. And at the new Opera House we have rigorous physiotherapy services, and the dancers all have private medical insurance paid by the company."

He conceded, however, that this season is "a learning curve" for the ballet management, and was not necessarily a template.

Kobborg, who danced Giselle last night only three days after a modern programme, emphasises that dancers have control over their choices.

"Yes, I have been tempted once or twice to say no to something that felt too much, but I trust the people here, that they know what I can do," he told me. "And I know my body better than anybody. If it got too much, I would just say no."

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