
Bringing Beauty back to life

The great Natalia Makarova is helping the Royal Ballet to stage a ravishing traditional version of *The Sleeping Beauty*. She talks to Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

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In the Royal Opera House props workshop there is a powerful smell of glue and paint as men in spattered white overalls bustle about. A large and ornate couch festooned with cherubs and painted bright blue awaits the sleeping bodies of seven Princess Auroras.

Nearby is the cradle where she will first be seen as a baby, another writhingly baroque creation currently painted silver but about to get the blue treatment.

It is only eight years since the props makers were last buried in cradles, chariots and royal couches, fashioning the Royal Ballet's previous production of the biggest spectacle in classical ballet, Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*.

That 1994 production was notorious not only for its seasick sets but also for its £600,000 cost and the defiant claim by the Opera House that it would last 20 years. Last year, quietly, the costumes for it were sold off at auction and the sets destroyed.

Its failure was a high-profile blow to the Royal Ballet's reputation for striking the perfect balance between theatrical flair and classical understanding, and the company's administrative director Anthony Russell-Roberts admits: "We certainly hope that this new design will be better received than the last one, which the critics hated."

Produced by one of the great Princess Auroras of the 20th century, the Russian ballerina Natalia Makarova, this *Sleeping Beauty* has been designed by the Italian Luisa Spinatelli and will cost between £650,000 and £700,000 - even more than the previous one. But this time, if there is any controversy, it will not be about its unconventionality.

It was commissioned by Ross Stretton, the recently departed Royal Ballet director, in 2001, and promises to be enormously pretty and totally traditional.

Instead of the strong black Aubrey Beardsley lines of the previous designs by Maria Bjornson, here are flowers, cherubs, shells, all the ornamentation of the baroque and rococo periods in which Tchaikovsky and Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the director of the Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg, conceived the ballet for Tsar Alexander III in 1890.

Spinatelli, whose designs for Paris Opera Ballet's recent *Paquita* have bewitched many viewers, believes that innovation is not what *The Sleeping Beauty* requires.

It is certainly the most difficult and complicated of ballets, she tells me, because it must be both classical and romantic in its feeling, symbolise the political and metaphorical subtexts of the work, and cover two visual periods very familiar to us, the 17th and 18th centuries - but "without banality and with magic".

With her vision of a panoramic journey from Louis XIV grandeur through Watteau lyricism into rococo period, Spinatelli has plenty of magical effects planned, from the (fibreglass) horses that will "invoke the magic from the start" to the veils trailing butterflies and ravens that will signal the conflicting fairies, the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse.

For Spinatelli and Makarova this is their first Sleeping Beauty, and the pair went to productions all around the world to decide how best to approach it, conscious that all the artistic aspects - visual, musical, dramatic and choreographic - must mingle in perfect balance.

Unable to see the previous Royal Ballet production or the Kirov's new "authentic" revision of the ballet, they agreed that they would base theirs on the standard Kirov version with which Makarova grew up before her defection in 1970.

I find Makarova - though an experienced producer of classical ballets - sitting backstage and admitting to nerves. "This is my first Beauty, my God! That's why I am so nervous. It's a big challenge for me, and to do it for the Royal Ballet is a big responsibility. I even don't believe myself why I dared to agree, but now I am glad actually."

For all that she has been 30 years in the West, Makarova remains the epitome of the Kirov ballerina style at its most aristocratic and refined.

Passing this style on to the new Auroras is paramount, she says, but not easy. "The Royal Ballet has no style now, because they come from all different schools in all different countries. It means they are open-minded, but I have to teach them to dance correctly in classical style."

It is decades since the Royal Ballet had a particular aesthetic look. Only two of the Auroras - Darcey Bussell and Miyako Yoshida - are Royal Ballet-trained, and the rest were schooled in Spain, Russia, South America and Canada.

Most of the princes are guests, and so Makarova says, somewhat exasperatedly, that she is having to teach all the individuals the refinements of academic style, as well as school the corps de ballet.

"They are very open-minded, but it needs an artistically strong hand to guide them," says Makarova in her seductively throaty voice, fine fingers fluttering.

"Aesthetically, when you do Sleeping Beauty, you are defining classicism at its most perfect - perfect turnout, which many dancers here don't have, the co-ordination between legs, eyes, fingers, hands, working in a harmony of movement. Nothing extra, nothing to distract away from purity.

"In the English school they don't pay much attention to expressive hands, and I think hands give the finesse to dancing. And epaulement doesn't exist here now. So I am not only doing the production and choreography, I have to teach, going back to basics. But

after this production I honestly think they are going to dance better in other classical productions."

She objects strongly to the Kirov's new move to restoring "authentic" productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* and other Petipa classics on the basis of original texts from St Petersburg. "What is authenticity?" she argues. "We are not robots. It is the nature of ballet that's different from music or drama - we deal with human beings, which is not stable, and every dancer uses their past experience to change the text.

"I put into this production all my experience as a dancer, as a choreographer, as a director, as an intellectual, as an artist - it's a combination of my life experience. I try to save the best of tradition, take out some of the rubbish that doesn't give anything to the story or to the eyes or to the heart, and preserve the best, plus some of my fantasy. I want to put in more magic, more purity, and more emphasis on the eternal conflict between evil and goodness. Which is very real for our time particularly. And I found this all in Tchaikovsky's music."

Meanwhile, the wardrobe department are struggling with more practical matters. Sheer numbers, for a start. There are, says Fay Fullerton, head of new costume production, more than 500 costumes to make by opening night, because of all the cast changes.

"Aurora has three tutus and a wedding gown, and there are seven Auroras," she says, fingering a gorgeous prototype tutu of 10 layers of net thickly decorated with tiny pink rosebuds, hand-cut petals and silver lace.

It will be made up seven times, in two skirt-lengths, Auroras ranging in height from Darcey Bussell's 5ft 7in to Alina Cojocaru's 5ft 2in. Every tutu is handmade, and Fullerton will trust only four people in Britain to sew classical tutus as ornate as these. If any of Britain's other ballet companies decided to mount a new production at the same time as the Royal Ballet, the tutu-makers could not cope.

With all those minute ornaments sewn on, and all that manhandling by the princes to come, I suggest that a certain amount of shedding is to be expected. Fullerton reacts sharply: "Not our tutus. Ours are made to last a lifetime. I can absolutely guarantee that things won't fall off."

One thing she can't guarantee is that this dewy tutu will finish a performance without tan make-up on its underskirts and grubbiness around its waist. When a prince lifts Aurora, his face frequently comes into contact with her skirts.

What makes Fullerton wince even more is to see the difference in men's partnering of the ballerina. "Some of them are fantastic and hold the ballerina as if she's a piece of paper, and others must think they're lifting a bag of potatoes. You can see them gripping the girl hard, which leaves marks on the waist, and even holding on to bits of the costume. The costumes always suffer with a bad partner."

Spinatelli is unworried. The English, she says, are the best classical tutu-makers in the world and it will be a pleasure to work with them on her next Royal Ballet production, a redesign of Ashton's *Cinderella*, this Christmas. The English know how to make the most of a ballerina's charms, she says, with a cunning combination of boning and elastic that looks well-structured and sexy but allows total freedom of movement.

The *Cinderella* production is currently in the final stages of preparation at the Royal Ballet's

