

ARTS

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Guardian of a guttering flame

NO ONE who was there will forget that night, October 29, a year ago, when Irek Mukhamedov stepped forward to take his curtain call for *Moscow at Covent Garden*. Once the darling of the Bolshoi, he had just given his debut performance as the tortured Crown Prince Rudolph, and had surely crowned his future as the keeper of the Kenneth MacMillan flame at the Royal Ballet.

But as the curtain rose something seemed wrong. Mukhamedov's face was white, he clutched his head, his feet dragged as he came down to the footlights. To the audience, it looked at first as if he was simply remaining in character.

It was not so. Mukhamedov had just learned what the audience was about to be told by Jeremy Isaacs, the Royal Opera House's general director — that Sir Kenneth MacMillan, *Moscow's* creator, had died from a heart attack backstage during the last act.

"I went off stage. I waited for my curtain call, and someone told me he was dead. I felt Shock Straightaway I thought, What will we do? What will the Royal Ballet do? I felt like the Royal Ballet lost its power."

Mukhamedov had good reason to worry — and not only about the Royal Ballet's future. It was a turning point for him, too. From that moment, shadows fell over a future that had looked both assured and secure.

A kind of creative coup de foudre had occurred between MacMillan and Mukhamedov. MacMillan had instantly seen how much more Mukhamedov was capable of than mere heroics, and Mukhamedov had instantly identified with MacMillan's probing ways.

Now that MacMillan is dead, what worries Mukhamedov is whether his ballets will remain the backbone of the Royal Ballet. And if not — more personally — whether Mukhamedov himself will have enough of interest to keep him there.

The five-year contract he signed when he defected from Russia in May 1990 has only 18 months to run. Last season and this, his performances have sharply decreased. He says he has spoken to Anthony Dowell, the Royal Ballet's director, about it. "I'm frightened if there are less ballets for me, if I give them all my best, they have to give it back to me. In my contract next year there has to be something more."

Or you will look elsewhere? "Yes."

And that would put the cat among the pigeons. Because can the Royal Ballet afford to lose its top box-office draw?

Mukhamedov has always been on the lookout for fresh challenges — hence his empathy with MacMillan. Two years ago, he decided to test out a latent interest in directing by setting

The Royal Ballet's star Irek Mukhamedov tells Ismene Brown about his fears for the future

up a small group of his favourite colleagues — including Viviana Durante, his chief partner — to perform little diversions in the regions. At the first performance of Irek Mukhamedov and Company, Royal Ballet management was conspicuous by its absence. Clearly no official seal of approval was being offered, but since he scheduled his little group for mid-season breaks, no one could complain either.

But now there's a whiff of intrigue in the air. For one thing, Mukhamedov and Company have booked Sadler's Wells Theatre next February — an extremely prominent venue. For another, Mukhamedov has found himself another choreographer, Kim Brandstrup, who is making a ballet on *Othello* for him.

And — most interesting of all — shortly after Mukhamedov hooked his Sadler's Wells slot, the Royal Ballet announced it was setting up its own small touring group, *Dance Trios*, which happens by coincidence to be performing at precisely the same time — and means that more of Mukhamedov's colleagues is available.

Mukhamedov did not grow up in the Soviet Union for nothing. He knows a diplomatic minefield when he sees one, and he will go no further than to say it is all "very difficult". The day has been saved by Birmingham Royal Ballet — its jewel-like star, Miyako Yoshida, will be his partner. The Royal Ballet, meanwhile, says it has no desire to be obstructive; blame the Arts Council for scheduling those touring dates.

Without doubt, it doesn't want

to offend Mukhamedov, who has a special relationship with Dowell that goes further than box office appeal. As *Suzette de Valois* had done when faced with another Russian maverick, Rudolf Nureyev, Dowell took a brilliant — even uncharacteristic — gamble when Mukhamedov turned up in London.

The *Hambourg* hero of the Bolshoi, last seen leaping bare-chested across enormous Russian stages, wanted to leave Moscow. Within minutes, Dowell had a five-year contract under his nose, and the Royal Ballet joyfully laid out its riches before him.

No dancer could have asked for more, particularly one as type-cast in big, bolshoi roles as Mukhamedov. Astonishingly, he had hardly touched the classics in Russia, so Sean Lally, no *Sirgyosy Benaz*, Over the next three years, the Royal Ballet filled in his gaps with a succession of classical partners. It groomed him in the great English roles of MacMillan, Ashton, Bintley Aul, the ultimate satisfaction, it propelled Mukhamedov — protesting characteristically, "no, no, it's impossible" — into the role of muse to its finest choreographer, Kenneth MacMillan.

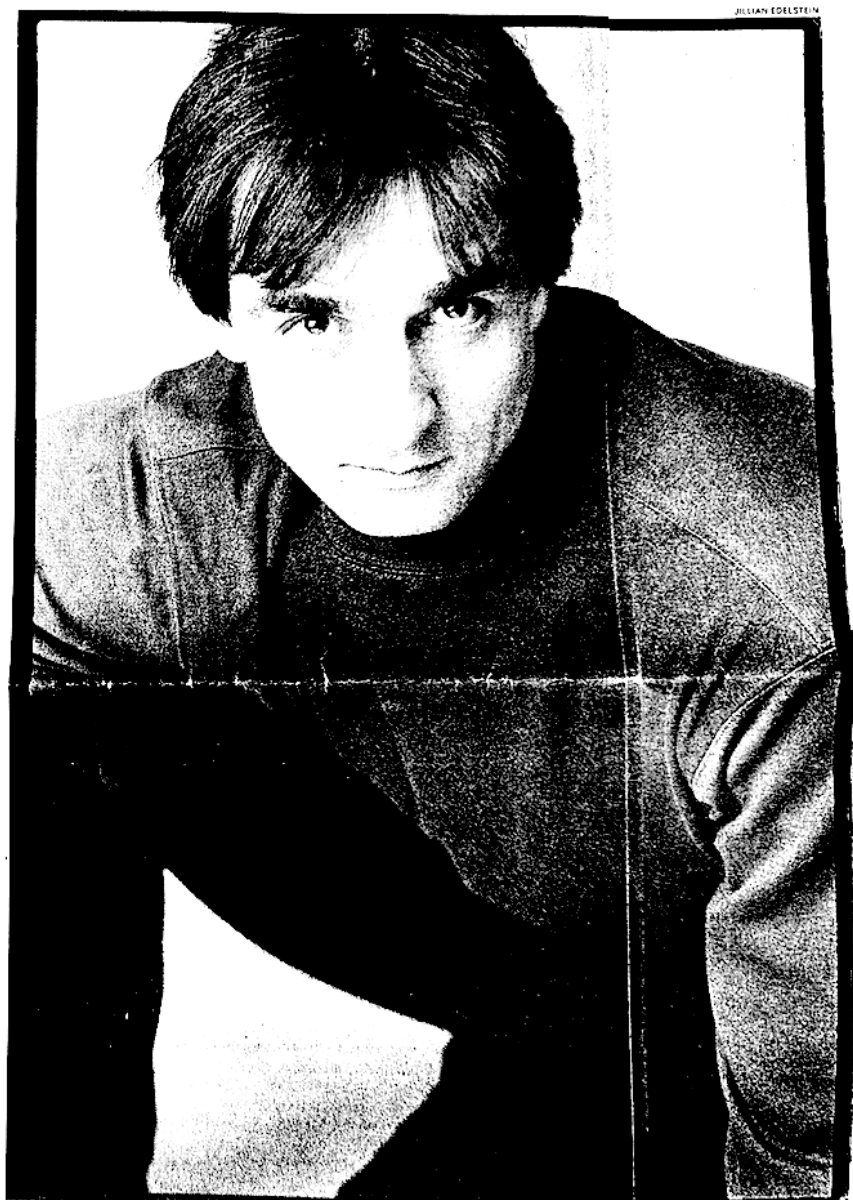
MUKHAMEDOV doesn't kid himself that special treatment is the best way to make friends in England. He regrets but, well, he is a star, and that's that. "In the Bolshoi although I knew deep down I was the leading dancer, nobody ever showed me I was the leading dancer. At the Royal Ballet I feel completely that I am a principal. I am comfortable. I try to be normal, to be a human being, not a star. Of course it's my fault, but sometimes dancers don't really pay respect to my work, to who I am. I have to remind them that they have to say hello to me, behave a little different. This is the right behaviour."

He stated this courteously but firmly. Very un-English. He didn't beat about the bush about his box-office rival, Sylvie Guillem, either. "I danced with her once, in *Bayadère*. It wasn't really a happy experience for her or for me."

What was wrong? "I don't know, we didn't understand each other. Maybe she tried, but I didn't understand her." Why can't two great dancers work together? "Well, maybe because we're both great dancers." He laughed. "There has to be someone less."

Do you like each other? I asked. "Well, I say hello. She sometimes gives an answer. But that's so the Dream Ticket duo isn't on, then. "No. Sorry."

It's been a long time since two individual dancers called the shots at the Royal Ballet. In the way of Guillem and Mukhamedov do, and it is not good for morale among the British contingent. Mukhamedov opens on



Dancer Irek Mukhamedov: "I felt like the Royal Ballet lost its power when Kenneth MacMillan died"



Box-office appeal: Mukhamedov in *Don Quixote*

Saturday in a revival of MacMillan's *Different Drummer*, and has half a dozen *Romeo* and *Rudolph*s to do next spring. But he revealed that many Royal Ballet dancers do not care for MacMillan — it is too concentrated on the chief players, there is not enough for others to do. And if they are reluctant to hand on what is almost an oral tradition, how will the vital MacMillan spirit survive?

"In Russia when a younger dancer learned Spartacus, they could ask me to help them. But in the Royal Ballet, this doesn't hap-

pen. Who will know how to do *Judas Iscariot* in another generation if they don't keep the work in the rep? Yes, they might have dancers who want to do the *Foreman* [the part created for him], but forget it, idea of the *Foreman*?"

Earlier this year, the Bolshoi company visited London, and Mukhamedov went backstage to see his old boss, Yuri Grigorovich. "It was the first time I saw him since I ran away." A defensive choice of phrase. "We are not great enemies." And? "He said if I wanted to go back I could do it."

Seriously? What could he offer?

"I don't know really. Yes. Maybe money." And he laughed engagingly.

Is this admission of his fears for the future merely to up the ante for his talks with Dowell? It doesn't seem so. Mukhamedov wants to stay in London, a city he loves. But what if he has to go? He says that Mukhamedov's decision will depend on the Royal Ballet keeping MacMillan's works prominent. Or will history repeat itself, and like that other Russian defector, will the Royal Ballet let its most charismatic artist slip through its fingers?

JILLIAN EDLSTEIN