

signals. If Whitehall Council is needed to do what it does best: advise, wheedle and, to leave please turn out the lights?

Not just a difficult dame

W. Oct 15 97

Ismene Brown talks to the uniquely talented Canadian ballerina Evelyn Hart

AS A RULE, great ballerinas emerge from great ballet institutions. Margot Fonteyn from the Royal Ballet, Suzanne Farrell from New York City Ballet, Altyнай Asylmuratova from the Kirov — the magical power of these ballerinas draws not only upon their individual genius but upon the culture they represent.

Rarely does a significant artist fledge other than at one of these magnificent nurseries, and even more rarely does one flourish on the global stage without a major company at her back.

Evelyn Hart is an exception. Her arrival this week in London with her company, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, from Canada, gives this country the first view in her maturity of a ballerina of utterly distinctive genius.

She is Canadian, like Lynn Seymour, and, like Seymour, the American Gelsey Kirkland and the French Sylvie Guillem, she is to be grouped in the band of individualists whom the world thinks of as *Difficult Dames* and who suffer for it, one way or another.

Hart, in fact, is about as difficult as you can get, which is why she is the principal ballerina in Winnipeg, a prairie town, and not heading one of the grand international flagships. Now she never will, because she is 41, and not many people will willingly work with such a perfectionist.

"A ballet nun! I know I am!" says the scrawniest ballerina I have ever met. She is 5ft 4in and weighs seven stone ("thinner than I should be, which is the result of not being terribly secure at the moment"). She is single, childless and obsessed with a vision of expressing ballet that consumes all her waking hours. She has battled with both anorexia nervosa and what sound like frightening neuroses ever since she began dancing.

Her face is a little monkey face, all bones and lines, and the words tumble out in a torrent, describing an unquiet search for ultimate expression. It is glorious to hear such nitpicking analysis of the art of ballet



One-off: Evelyn Hart Picture: LAURIE LEWIS

though there might be some who are more comfortable in virtuosity and modern thrust. "All those flashy things, the pirouettes and *fouettés*, are not me. I do them, but I work on the form and musicality of them. That's the

dancing.

Her face is a little monkey face, all bones and lines, and the words tumble out in a torrent, describing an unquiet search for ultimate expression. It is glorious to hear such nitpicking analysis of the art of ballet because Evelyn Hart doesn't just talk perfectionism, she dances it too. Watching her in the Hague last month, I saw a ballerina who is a one-off. She is perhaps a throwback to the early 19th-century period of romantic ballet. Ethereality, an elusive grace and lightness, and a technique so unconventional that it portrays fragility — these are what make Hart unusual today.

Part of it — maybe all of it — is because of her late start, and in the provinces at that. As a child she was rejected by Canada's National Ballet School (she still keeps the letter), and only began at 14, in a ballet school in London, Ontario. Years behind the others, she missed out on that automatic absorption of placing and line which enables early starters to take them for granted. Yet 10 years later she won the Gold Medal at the world's most prominent ballet competition, the Varna in Bulgaria.

Why did Hart stay with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet? It is Canada's oldest company, but smaller and less prestigious than the National Ballet of Canada, based in Toronto, 1,000 miles east. It has only 26 permanent dancers and is almost always on the road over the country's vast spaces; foreign tours are limited. However, it has built up an exceptional repertoire, ranging from classics (brought in in the 1980s for Hart) to 20th-century masters and Canadian choreographers.

No wonder, after all, that Hart has stayed there. The RWB flows gratefully round her, though it is conscious that as a role model she is a bit of a curate's egg, her style being shaped so much by her temperament. "Other people call me difficult; I say I am demanding."

She is very jolly, in her nerry way. "When you go out on stage you are already compromising 20 per cent on what you wanted to do, and I want the best. I don't want to settle. I want to say, I only have this chance this one time, at each performance. I don't know how many years I have left, and if I am dancing badly I would really rather someone else did it who's better."

There isn't anyone better than Hart,

though there might be some who are more comfortable in virtuosity and modern thrust. "All those flashy things, the pirouettes and *fouettés*, are not me. I do them, but I work on the form and musicality of them. That's the payment I have to make for all the other goodies."

The "goodies" are the fusion of steps with music and spiritual elevation. She was a violinist as a child, and there is a flowing, bowed quality in her dancing — the changes from step to step that she makes imperceptible, the arabesques that never freeze but are always phrasing from one step into the next. Even her stage walk is mesmerising, a waft that does not seem to touch the ground.

Her uncanny gift is only made art through an absorbed self-discipline and need to perform. She points out that to hold one's vision in mind, to mould the painfully won technique to pure expression of music, to the inner beats that she hears between beats, is so hard for even herself that it is unrealistic to expect it in others. And yet, in *pas de deux*, she desperately seeks a similarly sensitive partner.

"It's disheartening, because in a *pas de deux* we are in this together. And I work every day to make the best of myself, my highest *passé*, my most pointed foot, the quality of my pirouette, the closest musical expressiveness — and then when you have to trust a partner to take that on and he doesn't care how you turn, it's endlessly frustrating. And in some of the roles [such as *Giselle*, which she has danced perhaps 200 times] you finally get past the technical work and want to be in what I call the Trust Zone, where you can discover new things and you both become creative."

Such undisguised openness to her art makes her increasingly vulnerable, with age, to her sense of failure. Heaven knows what she will do when she stops — she sees it as a doom rather than release.

If she can present on stage 80 per cent of what she works for, Evelyn Hart promises to give London and Edinburgh audiences a view of balletic art of extraordinary and enduring poetic beauty.

Royal Winnipeg Ballet is at the Peacock Theatre, London (0171 314 8800), until Saturday; and the Edinburgh Festival Theatre (0131 529 6000) Oct 21-25, sponsored by The Daily Telegraph.

