

The Bolshoi's leap into the dark

Russia's best-known ballet company is at last free of its autocratic director Yuri Grigorovich. But the immediate future is bleak, says Ismene Brown

THE departure of Yuri Grigorovich from the Bolshoi Ballet has, like everything about his 31-year reign as artistic director, cleft reaction into two violently opposed camps.

His resignation this week prompted an unprecedented strike, led by his wife, prima ballerina Natalia Bessmertnova. His defenders argue that his dictatorial style kept the company together and the flag of ballet high during the Soviet era. They point to the divisive character of his successor, Vladimir Vasiliev, a superlative dancer who before he left the company in 1989 was both one of Grigorovich's most gifted protégés and one of his most vocal critics.

But for those who care about the future of ballet it is as if Carabosse's reign of night is over. Western ballet-lovers have, in the past 10 years, become bemused by bombastic claims about "the world's greatest ballet company". What they have seen on recent tours have been magically expressive dancers sleepwalking through a dead repertory.

Grigorovich had virtually turned the great Bolshoi into his own repertory company. His favouritism was legendary - wonderful ballerinas complained that they were kept down to promote his wife. Irek Mukhamedov recorded in his biography how dancers would have performances suddenly cancelled, their tours curtailed, without any reason being given.

Mukhamedov, now with the Royal Ballet, was Grigorovich's favourite dancer when he defected in 1990. He had replaced Vasiliev in Grigorovich's affections in the 1980s, and indeed strongly defended the director when Vasiliev's campaign to oust him came to a head.

Since he himself later abandoned Grigorovich, he has regretted some of the things he said then, but he still believes that Vasiliev's past leaves too much bitterness to be good for the future.

"It was time for Yuri to go but on the other hand the Bolshoi needs someone like Grigorovich, someone the dancers have respect for and are frightened of," says Mukhamedov. "Nobody is frightened of Vasiliev.

"Russia as a country is not on a high level, and so its culture is also some way down and it needs someone people will trust and follow. Maybe I am wrong - I *hope* I am wrong. Vasiliev has always wanted to be director, and if he looks after himself and brings in only his ballets, rather than thinking about the company, he will not save the Bolshoi. The right person must be someone who gives all his energy to bring back that fresh life into the Bolshoi."

EVEN if Vasiliev, who until recently worked at Rome Opera, does widen the repertory, he still faces terrible problems. He has to find some £200million simply to deal with the crumbling Bolshoi Theatre building, at a time when there is anxiety about the Russian government's commitment to state funding of ballet.

Somehow he also has to reassure the dancers that the new Western-style contracts will benefit them, rather than spelling an end to the security that the old jobs-for-life system offered.

Last year's collapse of the proposed stately homes tour in Britain put a major blight on the Bolshoi's already waning clout with foreign impresarios. Without that desperately needed touring income, people are asking if the Bolshoi can survive even another year. Vasiliev has to find answers not just for the sake of the Bolshoi but for the whole ballet world.

Bleak though the immediate future looks, in the long term Mukhamedov cannot believe the Russians will let their flagship company go to the wall.

"At the moment nobody's interested in culture, even in the Bolshoi, because everybody's thinking about politics and how to find bread, how to live. But of course the Bolshoi will get back its greatness. It has 200 years of history - it's impossible to bring that down."