

## The French are simply the best



Photo NVC Arts

**Nureyev transformed Paris Opera Ballet from a dull and complacent company into the world's best. Now they visit the UK for the first time in 16 years and are unmissable, says Ismene Brown**

IT IS a truth almost universally acknowledged that nobody dances ballet better today than the French. With the refinement of the Russians, the attack of the Americans, and a sophisticated sexuality that remains uniquely French, we see in the Ballet de l'Opéra National de Paris the ideal combination of qualities. The Paris Opera Ballet has become a legend in its own time - its mystery deepened by its geographical proximity to us and yet its aloof unavailability.

Now for the first time in 16 years we can see Paris Opera Ballet in this country, in Salford's new Lowry arts centre from next Thursday. For the Lowry this is a brilliant catch with which to inaugurate its stylish 1,760-seat Lyric Theatre, and there were anxious moments last week when it looked as though the new fully sprung floor might not be to Paris Opera Ballet's taste. In the end they decided to bring their own touring floor - problem solved.

A relieved Stephen Hetherington, director of the Lowry, points out that to get Paris is a real coup. And they are not at all expensive. Although he won't reveal the figure, he has agreed an expenses-only deal with Paris, thanks in part to influence from the French government, eager to have its most glorious cultural product shown in style.

They will be dancing that exotic tale of love, murder and opium *La Bayadère* - by curious coincidence the same ballet that Russia's most glorious cultural product, the Kirov Ballet, will bring next week to Edinburgh, on the first of three visits to the UK this year.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Paris is how in the time since Britain last saw it in 1984, it has transformed itself from being one of the dullest, most complacent of ballet companies into one of the most admired in the world. It is the oldest ballet company of all, founded as an exclusively male ensemble by Louis XIV, the Sun King, in 1661, and it rapidly inspired monarchs in other countries to get their own: Russia, Denmark, Sweden.

By the early 19th century Paris was the centre of the ballet universe: *La Sylphide*, a landmark ballet, launched the revolutionary idea of Romantic ballet, and *Giselle* and *Coppélia* followed - tragedy and comedy. But then the great French balletmasters were invited to Russia by the Tsars, and in St Petersburg the master choreographer Marius Petipa created the classical works - *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* - that became accepted as the basis for ballet worldwide. All except in France.

There, while Paris's artists and composers surged forward, ballet was insultingly limited, "a means of showing young girls to the Opéra's male patrons", according to Claude Bessy, former ballerina and now head of the Paris Opéra School. Serge Diaghilev and his crew of St Petersburg rebels in the Ballets Russes, Michel Fokine, George Balanchine, Vaslav Nijinsky, hit Paris like a thunderbolt in the 1910s, and inspired - in the charismatic hands of Diaghilev's last male star Serge Lifar - a new upsurge in French ballet.

But things slowly fell apart again, and by 1983 when Rudolf Nureyev was appointed as director, Paris was lagging a long way behind booming young England and America with their 20th-century discovery of ballet. Nureyev had in fact wanted to run the Royal Ballet, but was thought too controversial a character. London's loss was Paris's gain. The Russian superstar may have over-indulged his own need to perform and choreograph, but he introduced for the first time in France the great Petipa classics of St Petersburg.

He also raised a generation of fabulous stars. Sylvie Guillem is world-famous now, but of equal lustre are others raised in the phenomenal Eighties and Nineties: Elisabeth Platel (who will be dancing in Salford, despite having officially retired), Isabelle Guérin (absent here due to pregnancy), Manuel Legris, Laurent Hilaire and Nicolas Le Riche. And the stars keep coming. The latest dazzling French ballerina is Aurélie Dupont, who will be performing in Salford.

NOT surprisingly, the Nureyev act was a hard one to follow, but it *must* be followed, according to Brigitte Lefèvre, the incisive former dancer and theatre director who has directed the company since 1995.

"I admit, it was sometimes a little hard for me because Rudolf was such a huge star, and I am not," smiles this auburn-haired woman in her late forties. Very smart and charming. Lefèvre looks like nobody's pushover. Shortly after we met in her office in the magnificent Palais Garnier - a section of what used to be Nureyev's suite - she announced her 2000-1 season.

It is a mouthwatering combination of freshness and antiquity; among its 12 programmes is an ambitious restoration of one of Petipa's story-ballets, *Paquita*, a William Forsythe evening (including no fewer than three

creations for the Paris company), Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* (all the rage in Paris), and a brand-new full-evening ballet *Nosferatu* by a French modern choreographer, Jean-Claude Gallotta. If only the Royal Ballet could achieve similarly tempting menus.

However, Lefèvre points out that the scale of the operation there is vastly different. Though France and Britain have similar-sized populations, France throws taxpayers' money at ballet with an unfeigned glee. The Paris Opera has 154 dancers, a subsidy of 900million francs, (£90million), and two great theatres, the Opéra Bastille and the Palais Garnier. The Royal Opera House has 83 dancers, a total subsidy of £20million, and one theatre. And Covent Garden's labyrinthine structure is as nothing compared with Paris's, which has been proliferating since 1661.

"I am happy to be in a country that takes such care of dance, not only in the Opéra but elsewhere too," says Lefèvre. "But there is a very hierarchical structure at the Opéra, within which I have a partial autonomy for the ballet. It's pretty difficult to say 'me', in a company of this sort."

Lefèvre left the Paris Opera Ballet at 20 when she was a junior soloist, in order to found her own innovative theatre-dance company. Later she worked for a while in the ministry of culture, and as an administrator and teacher, before taking up her current job. In true Parisian style, she is a controversial director. Notably, she thawed the company chilliness towards Guillem, who once again dances regularly with her old company which she rejected in 1989 in favour of London.

Lefèvre praises the "intelligence, sensitivity and theatrical taste" of London dancing - "it's something we do less well," she gracefully concedes. And she has been waging a long battle, so far unsuccessful, to obtain Ashton's ballets for Paris, in particular *A Month in the Country* and *La Fille mal gardée*. "We have an ample grant but sometimes we face financial demands that we consider too high," she says politely, and refuses to expand.

The bottom line for her, though, is what will keep Paris Opera Ballet great. "What irritates me is when people are content with exactly how things are. What I find great is progress, moving forward, the desire to achieve whether you succeed or not. To do ballet well is a fragile thing. I'd love it if, performance after performance, people thought that for the evening they were there we were the greatest company in the world."