

Dance Now, Winter 2008/09

Side by Side

Ekaterina Maximova and Vladimir Vasiliev by Ismene Brown

Visuals: The Nutcracker 1966; Icarus 1971; today (photo Marina Panfilovich)

FIFTY years ago, in 1958, two youngsters entered the Bolshoi Ballet - a handsome blond boy of 18 called Vladimir Vasiliev, a tiny, dainty girl a year older called Ekaterina Maximova. They were dazzling individuals, superlative technicians, fascinating characters and stage actors. Within a year they were the company's latest sensations. Maximova was given her first major role by Yuri Grigorovich when he came to Moscow to stage his Leningrad success, *The Stone Flower*. Kitri and Giselle quickly followed - Maximova was the Bolshoi's youngest Giselle ever at that time. Meanwhile Vasiliev was seized upon by the Bolshoi's choreographers, Radunsky, Lavrovsky, Lapauri, Goleizovsky, developing a new, athletic male figure in dance, and he was made principal dancer within a year. But it was Grigorovich who was to be the couple's defining creator and nemesis, he who made Maximova the darling of most of his productions, and Vasiliev the immortal epitome of a mighty, heroic Everyman, above all in *Spartacus*. And it was Grigorovich against whom the two would rebel, decades later, when Vasiliev would become the leader of an alternate Bolshoi, seeking paths to the West while Grigorovich stayed fixed to an adamant Soviet iconography.

As individuals, Vasiliev and Maximova glittered and gleamed everywhere that they danced in the world. But it was as something even rarer, that the pair gave the Bolshoi a priceless treasure, as a partnership of two diamonds set together into a jewel that ignited its own iconography. Great partnerships are rare in ballet. They require absolute equality of lustre in the two dancers, complementary emotional nuance and responsiveness, equal personal standards in skill and curiosity, and a host of other compatibilities. It is no wonder that in Russia's massive ballet history in the 20th century, the joyful, sexually charged partnership of Ekaterina Maximova and Vladimir Vasiliev remains so far ahead of any other, spoken of only in breath with Fonteyn and Nureyev, and of course lasting far, far longer.

Their long identification with the Bolshoi as two of its most loved dancers was celebrated by a four-day performance festival in Moscow at the end of October. Two of their signature classics, *Don Quixote* and *Giselle* (in Vasiliev's production for the Bolshoi), were performed by Bolshoi stars of today (several of them pupils or past muses of the pair), with Vasiliev's own prolific choreography on view in a staging of his Chekhov ballet *Anyuta*.. Finally came a starry gala with the Bolshoi's present celebrities, Nikolai Tsiskaridze, Svetlana Zakharova, Ivan Vasiliev and Natalia Osipova, joined by Maryinsky prima Ulyana Lopatkina and stars from the Paris and Rome ballets.

An atmosphere of forgiveness reigned - no one mentioned that Grigorovich is back in a leading position inside the Bolshoi, and in his many interviews Vasiliev was not discussing his internecine war with his former boss and his own unhappy period as Bolshoi artistic director in the late 1990s. Indeed, Grigorovich wrote the couple a charming letter of congratulation to them for their achievement in marking 50 years of association with the Bolshoi.

The day after the gala, I asked the couple about the first time they met.

Ekaterina Maximova: We first got together at the Bolshoi ballet school in a class from our very first year. He was 9 and I was 10, it was in 1949. No one really put us together. Volodya had quite a number of girls dancing with him, and I had all the boys too. But mostly we danced together.

Vladimir Vasiliev: Through nine years of school we were dancing together, and at the graduation concert I was the Prince and Katya Masha in *Nutcracker*. So when we went into the company we were already known as a partnership.

Which came first - personal love for each other or professional partnership?

VV First came the professional partnership [IB: the pair married in 1961].

How long from first meeting did it take to become a true partnership?

VV 50 years!

So you're still working on it! But when you coach young artists now how do you see when two people could be a great partnership?

EM Certain physical qualities matter, how they look together, and emotional qualities. Sometimes there is an emotional energy between two people and you see that they understand each other, that they talk to each other. But sometimes you think, oh no, it's impossible to put these two people together, she's too big, he's too small, and yet then there's some emotional input from the pair and they suddenly come together. You saw the opening production in our festival, *Don Quixote*. Galina Stepanenko was performing Kitri, who is a mature established star with a long career, and with her as Basilio was a very young rising artist, Ivan Vasiliev. It was a chance meeting that made this happen. Last season at the Marina Semyonova centenary gala, Galina was to dance *Don Quixote pas de deux*, but her partner was ill. Ivan Vasiliev was there, but I thought it wasn't possible, first of all their age difference, and physically she's quite big and he is not so big. But Alexei Ratmansky [Bolshoi's artistic director] was convincing us it was possible, so I said to Galina, come on, let's try. They came to a studio, and in just two movements I realised it would work between them. The energy they had was so much of the same kind that you could hardly see the difference, technically or dynamically, and now they've danced the whole production as well.

It seems strange that your long partnership is unusual. I would think there could be more big partnerships here, more often.

EM It's very rare, yes.

VV When we came here, you see we were of the same age. Galina and Ivan's partnership can't work for long first

because of their age difference. Secondly, it's a constant business working together - in our case we were working on it for nine years from school, and also we're still alive and we danced a long time. Our last Giselle was in Metropolitan Opera House in New York when Katya was 51 and I was 50. It was not even our last performance of all. So you need the physical ability to last too.

How do you see your wife as a ballerina?

VV A ballerina with an amazing, wonderful technique, of very great beauty, and who can work despite injuries or obstacles - she can work all day long. And a ballerina who suited the images which I wanted to create. It doesn't mean I staged all my productions on her, because there were certain titles I staged for other dancers. But frankly, in a way all my life I have been doing everything only for my wife!

The most noticeable thing you, Madame Maximova, have on film, is this extraordinary radiance, lustre, and such joy. You appear so happy on stage.

EM Well, it's my profession!

You were pretending all these years?

EM [smiling] Well, I was performing. Once you're on stage it's part of your profession.

What was special about Vladimir Vasiliev as a partner?

EM We've been together for so many years that we have this interior understanding of each other. We have the same aims, same values.

VV I can tell you simply - she felt secure with me. But the main thing is that two people share the same breath.

On the film we saw in the gala, Mr Vasiliev, you showed two outstandingly different images - as the hurtling macho man who is so famous but also as an exceptionally clean classicist. Did you personally work on your classical line or was this the product of your teaching then?

VV I think the biggest teachers of my life were my contemporaries whom I saw dancing on stage. I tried to pick up all their best qualities. It was not a bad generation. It was Erik Bruhn, it was Rudik Nureyev, Nikolai Fadeychev. Liepa, and even some people younger than me, like Lavrovsky. I studied them all. The greatest coach in the world can't give you what is given to you by the dancers surrounding you. And not only male dancers. For classical hands I learned in some ways from Elizaveta Gerdt, from Katya and Plisetskaya. There was that feeling they had of the hands and wrists - not many people have the sense of wrists, the breathing through each of your fingers. Because in the major part of ballerinas' dancing, the biggest attention they pay is to their feet and legs, and they tend to forget that dance, real dance, can't be split between separate parts of your body. Real dance is the whole. It's how you move your neck, how you turn your body, or your shoulders - the breath that goes through each flowing movement.

There would be many dancers who would not consider watching their peers. It's unusual.

VV Of course.

EM That's why you got different dancers!

Madame Maximova, who were your idols and inspirations?

EM Ulanova. Margot Fonteyn. Chauviré. Maya Plisetskaya. These are all people whom I admire and I always looked to learn from them. Also you could learn even by watching a bad dancer, see how you should not be doing it.

When you first saw the partnership of Fonteyn and Nureyev, did it seem possible that their partnership would last?

EM We didn't see the partnership. We knew Rudik from school, he was in the same year that we graduated, but in St Petersburg. Margot Fonteyn came here to Moscow in, I don't know, about 1957. So their duet built up much later.

I wonder if there is tension for men, in particular, between being a very good soloist and a very good partner.

VV Frankly, when Rudolf was here in Russia I always thought he was a bad partner, because he never paid attention to anyone else. He couldn't stop thinking only about himself on stage. But the amazing thing was that when he began dancing with Margot although he influenced Margot very much, in her future dancing, it was the first time in Rudolf's own history, I think, that he himself became a good partner. Rudolf became a reasonable partner only when he started to dance with Fonteyn - here in Russia he could be unpredictable, do strange things, like let her go suddenly, things you cannot do in duo dancing.

I heard Baryshnikov too was a little like that, that it was in the US that he became a great partner.

VV It's easier to see with Baryshnikov. Nureyev in Russia was already at the top level, while Baryshnikov reached top level when he went to the US. Here he was just a very talented and promising dancer.

in England the men are very gentle, courteous - good partners, but not so good as soloists. Interesting that you are a very rare example of a brilliant soloist and a very devoted partner.

VV We had wonderful coaches for duo dancing. Vladimir Golubin, and my coach Mikhail Gabovich, and Katya's coach Elizaveta Gerdt. Golubin and Gabovich always told me that when you dance with a ballerina she is the most important person on stage. Golubin had this wonderful statement: he said in duo dancing everything is so simple - the man must not get in the way of the woman! Later on when we started dancing together in Don Q I understood that this statement might not be absolutely right, because there it's essential that in the pas de deux you have two heroes with the same importance, and one of them must not be in the other's shadow or you won't get the impact. But sometimes, yes, you just have to accept the shadow!

How did you feel when your husband lifted you, Madame Maximova? How did his grip feel?

EM Very good hands, very comfortable. He felt me very well.

VV Once Katya said to me - and she was right - that in high lifts my hands were the best, but in par terre movements the best man with the best hands was Fadeychev. He was phenomenal.

EM Dancing with him you felt nothing, you felt so comfortable, and you just felt he was doing nothing to you. I prefer to feel the hands, then you feel secure. But not when they grab you.

VV Because sometimes you sense the man's holding on to the ballerina, and this is horrible.

In contemporary ballet by Grigorovich or MacMillan, often women have to run across the stage without looking and just expect the man will catch them blind ... was your husband always there?

EM Always! He never missed.

In such a long partnership isn't there a danger you get too familiar with each other?

VV Well, if they get too familiar, they stop. In life and on stage.

EM I don't know - we never really felt this. Each production was like a first performance. Every time we danced it was as if it was the last time. And then we'd have changed some accent or some nuance, so each performance was different.

Did you work harmoniously in the studio or did you fight?

VV We fight quite a lot.

EM Especially when we started preparing a new production - we each had our own idea and wanted to convince the other that this was how it should be done, this was the right way. And we'd be searching for it all the time. It's the same in life, if something didn't go right, if you're angry, it's always aimed at the person you're closest to.

Was the gala like watching your lives being replayed?

VV We replayed only a tiny tiny bit of our lives. We thought the gala might be interesting for the audience because we had such a big concert repertoire together that is not used now, and some of those numbers people had never seen before. Just wanted to show this kind of dance had existed.

EM And I think it was quite difficult for some of the dancers, and interesting for them to do it. They really wanted to do it.

VV Every single time you watch something it's with a professional eye. Especially if you're looking at your own pupils it's with far more nervousness and emotion than when you're dancing yourself. And if you could have seen from the side what we were feeling or speaking about, somebody might have thought we were always dissatisfied... why not this, this was better yesterday, why did that happen. But yesterday, for example, with Zakharova, we all knew her abilities and physique, but when me and Katya watched her on stage in Macbeth and we saw that this piece suited her so well, she was more free and amazingly emotional, in her plastique, her hands, she was much better in performance than in the class. It's great when you see someone so much better.

You are both so strongly identified with such a list of roles, Kitri, Albrecht, Giselle, Spartacus, Basilio, Anyuta - if a fire started, which costume would you grab to remind you of a favourite role?

VV I would just pray to God not to burn down with them! Who cares about costumes? Goleizovsky said the best costume was no costume, just your body.