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Time to get authentic

Mona Inglesby's heritage is assessed by Ismene Brown

When she died last October aged 88, Mona Inglesby was a curiously unsung heroine of British ballet. Her role as the director and prima ballerina of the International Ballet, a large-scale and commercially successful company throughout the Second World War and the austerity years, seemed virtually forgotten. Despite her 13-year achievement and the high class of her artists and productions, drawn directly from Petipa's own, she was often overlooked in histories of early British ballet, and after retiring from the stage in 1953 she lived the rest of her life in obscurity.

But world ballet owes Inglesby a potentially even greater debt - perhaps its future. This came forcibly to attention in 2000, when the Kirov Ballet staged a recreation of Petipa's last production of 'The Sleeping Beauty', based on the Imperial texts that had been rescued for posterity by Inglesby. The resulting production (and further "authentic" productions since) has raised the exciting and complex question of whether it is possible or desirable to try to establish true texts in 19th-century classics, and thus revolutionise the appreciation and teaching of ballet's different periods. In August 2000, on the eve of the Kirov's London premiere of their "original" 'Sleeping Beauty', Mona Inglesby told me her almost incredible story for the Daily Telegraph, from which the following is an edited version.

THE visit by the Kirov Ballet with their new "authentic" production of 'The Sleeping Beauty' climaxed one of the most extraordinary stories in recorded ballet history. The production had depended upon the discovery that the original texts of the immortal ballets created by Marius Petipa in St Petersburg had been smuggled out of Revolutionary Russia, via London, to safe house in an American museum.

These unique texts lay in Harvard virtually unnoticed and almost indecipherable throughout the Soviet period, until the post-Soviet Kirov was reminded of their existence and decided to attempt a return to their Imperial roots, to see what lay under a century of Soviet edits and revarnishings. Their spectacular recreation of 'The Sleeping Beauty' in its original form gives us a chance now to hail the unsung heroine of this remarkable tale - a long-forgotten English ballerina.

Mona Inglesby is 82 now, beautiful, poised but very frail. For many years she has lived quietly in a rest home in Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, hardly noticed, and yet her story is stranger than fiction. In her teens she trained with the legendary prima ballerina of St Petersburg Mathilde Kchessinskaya in Paris, where she fell in love with Russian classical ballet. In 1940, aged only 21, she launched the International Ballet, rivalling NINETTE DE VALOIS'S Sadler's Wells Ballet and Marie Rambert's Ballet Rambert. It was wartime, but with an initial loan from her entrepreneur father, she amassed 40 dancers, later rising to 80.

And, seeking the best possible Russian classical vision, she offered her company to Marius Petipa's former balletmaster at the great Mariinsky Ballet, Nikolai Sergeyev, as a vehicle to reproduce the Russian classics in the Imperial style.

When Petipa and his acolytes Lev Ivanov and Mikhail Fokine created ballets such as 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Swan Lake' and 'Les Syphides', it was Sergeyev who taught the choreography. He had also been in charge of a Maryinsky project to record the entire repertoire in the in-house notation system. By the Revolution 24 ballets and 24 operaballets had been notated under their creators' eyes: a unique record of ballet's golden age.

As the proletariat set out their new agenda, Sergeyev feared that ballet, a luxurious manifestation of Tsarist culture and religious sensibility, would be destroyed. In 1918 he and his wife, under cover of official emigration, secretly packed the sheaves of papers into wooden trunks and arranged a smuggling route.

Mona Inglesby told me, "I remember Maestro telling me that the last leg of the trip was from Riga, and I think he said the notations were brought over by the British Navy - he had to let them out of his sight. Madam Sergeyev said it was a terrible, frightening time."

At first Sergeyev found willing takers for his priceless knowledge: his old acquaintance Serge Diaghilev in Paris, then Ninette de Valois, who engaged him for 10 years in London to produce the classics upon which what is now the Royal Ballet was founded. But as her company developed its own creative momentum, cultures clashed. St Petersburg's balletmaster found himself overruled by the dynamic de Valois, who tailored crisper productions for wartime resources and a different national taste, and had contemporary choreographers such as Frederick Ashton and Bronislava Nijinska adapt Petipa's work.

"I think he was treated abominably," was Inglesby's opinion. "He was so unhappy at Sadler's Wells. He was very glad to come to International Ballet, because we wanted to do everything the way he wanted it. That was all he lived for, to keep these Maryinsky productions alive."

And she asked me to put something important on record: "I must make it clear that Sergeyev insisted I should be the ballerina at International Ballet or he would not do his productions with us. I didn't put myself forward - he put me forward."

She insists upon this because one of the crosses Inglesby has had to bear was the constant snipe that the company was a vehicle funded by a devoted father for his hopeful ballerina daughter. Yet, she pointed out, International Ballet was a very large touring company that turned in a profit for 12 years in austere times, which

would have been impossible without assured artistic quality. Its artists included Harold Turner, Moira Shearer, Maurice Béjart, and its large classical productions had the most fashionable designers around. The Royal Festival Hall opened in 1951 with six weeks of International Ballet. The Royal Ballet star Moira Shearer, once an IB member, remembers Inglesby as "a lovely, very fluid classical dancer... a real pleasure to watch".

But crisis came after Sergeyev's death in 1951. Perhaps old age and widowerhood made him homesick for Russia. Perhaps his trust in Britain had been shaken by seeing the increasingly grand Sadler's Wells Ballet opening Covent Garden in 1946 with a new 'Sleeping Beauty' that made several alterations to his original staging. At any rate, he did something unexpected when he died, and which has been wrongly recorded in history books. Inglesby wanted me to make clear that in his will Sergeyev did not bequeath his historic notations to her.

"Oh no, to my great surprise, he left them all to a friend of his who was not interested in ballet at all." A Russian, she thinks. "I was horrified. Would they just moulder away, be destroyed forever? And I asked my father please to buy them, so they would be rescued. As far as I remember it cost £200, and Sergeyev's friend was only too happy to get rid of them."

Inglesby now had the precious notations, but without Sergeyev's strict hand International Ballet had run its course. In 1953 she folded it, quit ballet, and bore her son Peter. But the Sergeyev boxes were stored in her mother's basement in Kensington Gore, and much on her mind. In the 1960s she began hunting for a permanent home for them.

She offered them to the Royal Ballet - "they said 'no thank you', and I was quite pleased. I don't like Ninette de Valois anyway." She contacted the former Mariinsky Ballet (renamed the Kirov in 1935) and "someone came over to meet me at the Grosvenor Hotel". But this was the height of Cold War, just after Nureyev's inflammatory defection, and the Kirov considered the notations stolen, in any case. Inglesby was not confident the records would be safe. An RAD initiative also came to nothing. Finally, in 1969 the Harvard Theatre Collection in Boston, USA, purchased the Sergeyev notations for some £6,000, promising safe keeping in perpetuity.

Even then, this fraught tale seemed hardly likely to have its due happy ending. By 1970 every company had its own versions of these classics, oral tradition and constant adaptation were the norm rather than any strict consultation of "text", and besides no one could read the archaic Mariinsky notation system until an old primer was discovered in the theatre library. It took another political revolution in Russia, and the courageous step by the Kirov to reclaim its past, to bring these sheets of enigmatic pencil marks back to their central position of potential authority.

For Mona Inglesby the recognition, at long last, that she did right by Sergeyev and Petipa has been the best possible medicine. She said she would not be seeing the new "old" 'Sleeping Beauty'. "I'm an old ballerina now, an ancient lady," she said, with dignity. "I can't make such a journey nowadays." Russia, and indeed all ballet, should be so grateful to her, I said. "Maybe they are, maybe not. I don't really mind. So long as these things are going to be well looked after and treated with respect, I am quite happy."

**'At some point soon
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must be seriously debated
in classical staging and
teaching practice'**

AFTER my article appeared (causing a deluge of readers' letters to me expressing delight at "rediscovering" Inglesby), I was particularly intrigued by reaction from some Russian ballet-lovers. From their point of view, Nikolai Sergeyev had been a thief, stealing Mariinsky theatre property, and therefore Inglesby had never had the right to sell them to the US. By this argument, the records should be legally restored to St Petersburg for its own use, not left open to the world in the US.

Inglesby herself wrote me a subsequent letter which sheds light on Sergeyev's actions: she wrote that he insisted to her that the notation project was not an official theatre one but more of a personal enthusiasm of his and a few others, which eventually won Petipa's interest and permission. Thus he claimed the notations belonged more to him than to the theatre, and he had the right to take them. Sergeyev was a student when the notation system (invented by a 25-year-old anatomist Vladimir Stepanov and described as "An Alphabet of Body Movements") had been experimented with in the St Petersburg and Moscow schools from the early 1890s. Even if one could imagine that the project depended for some years on individuals being enthusiastic spare-timers, rather than officially appointed notators, it is debatable that the notations were not property of the theatres where they were being made. According to Koegler's Oxford Dictionary, both Petipa in St Petersburg and Gorsky in Moscow were using notations in stagings. But now the question of who owned the texts seems less relevant than their global availability and preservation.

It is all very messy at the moment. Only a few scholars in America, Russia, France and Britain read Stepanov well, and they disagree on the accuracy and satisfactoriness of the different notations - dependent on such factors as the notators' handwriting, the readers' own fluency and understanding of ballet of the time, and mistakes in the cataloguing. Some notations are more sensitive to music than others; some pages are so sketchy as to seem aides-memoires only decipherable by the writer rather than comprehensive information. Pierre Lacotte's creative reimaging of 'The Pharaoh's Daughter' for

the Bolshoi reflected his belief that the Petipa original is unsalvageable from the 254-page notation, but others dispute this. Compromises are made with today's expectations and tastes - the Kirov's "authentic" 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Bayadère' still pandered to 20th-century taste by retaining "modern" virtuoso variations.

Very few 19th-century reconstructions have so far been attempted, partly reflecting the cost, time and doubt over the reception of such productions, by audiences and interpreters. How and whether to establish the original Petipa/Ivanov 'Swan Lake' is a fraught question, given its iconic stature in the canon and its traditional malleability in the hands of producers and ballerinas. Meanwhile teachers who dominate the major schools continue to produce generations of dancers who believe style is what they themselves define today with their coach, not what a notator tells them about what was done in a particular period. Notation itself varies from country to country, and is no longer compulsory in a dancer's training - pace Marie Rambert, who opined in the 1920s that reading notation should be as essential to a dancer's understanding of a piece of choreography as reading a score is to a musician.

There is further the creative consequence. What if "authentic" texts are established and all those tinkering and adapted versions that different companies produce become suspect, that the fine Wright/Nureyev/MacMillan/Deane revisions "after" Petipa or Coralli must be abandoned? William Forsythe once told me that choreographers will simply have to stop being "adapters" of old familiars and choose either to faithfully direct authentic texts or to create their own new narratives from scratch.

I like to imagine going when I'm 80 to, say, a 'Jewels' "after Balanchine", or a 'The Invitation' "after MacMillan", with some tricky or rude bits smoothed away here, and a bright new solo inserted there, maybe with a musical change to fit a matinee audience or a dinner interval timetable. At some point soon the question of text and authenticity must be seriously debated in classical staging and teaching practice - which will be when Mona Inglesby's actions will finally have the value they deserve. Most ballet-lovers are apprehensive that continuing to stir periods, schools and tastes nervously together in pursuit of some formulaic box-office appeal is producing not more flavour but less. Companies and performers without the intellectual curiosity to relish differences end up with dull homogeneity. Let us use our taste buds better in ballet. Late 20th-century and 21st-century choreographers have looked after their texts with a possessiveness that ensures future audiences will see their works as intended. It will be a grotesque failure not to do the 19th century a similar favour, given that the tools are at hand to seek out exactly what it entails.