

## The Cleopatra ballerina who stays out in the cold



Photo: Matthew Ford

### ***In a rare interview the great ballerina Lynn Seymour tells Ismene Brown why she's so wary of public attention***

A LOT of typewriter ribbon has frayed on the subject of Lynn Seymour. She is 'the greatest dramatic dancer of the era', according to Dame Ninette de Valois. Yet when she joined English National Ballet in 1989, one dancer told a newspaper contemptuously, 'She teaches with a beer can in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Who needs that?'

Her image has see-sawed wildly between genius and Bad Girl. Both sides of the image are fed with plenty of material: consistently awestruck reviews of her dancing - and a considerable amount of backstage bitchery about her weight problems. Or drink problems. Or temper problems. Or man problems. Or money problems. These in turn were said to explain her absences from the stage. Where Fonteyn and Sibley sailed through their careers like galleons - in public, at least - Seymour's ship was always taking in water.

It is unsurprising, then, that over the years she has avoided the press like the plague. I hadn't realised quite how scarred she is by publicity - or at least by her own view of what her public image is - until I met her last week. She had refused interview requests for her own recent appearances with Scottish Ballet as Lady Capulet, and with Northern Ballet Theatre in *A Simple Man*, but she agreed to 'do it for Derek's thing' - Derek being the film director Derek Jarman, who asked her to play the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova in his new film, *Wittgenstein*.

Seeing her on film, however briefly, as the exotic Diaghilev ballerina who married John Maynard Keynes is a poignant experience. Lopokova, bejewelled, bubbling with confidence, revered by her peers - played by Seymour, who went bankrupt three years ago and now lives alone in a small studio house in Hammersmith, worrying about tax demands. Seymour, who seems still, at 54, despite a CBE, to feel as much an outsider as when she arrived from Canada aged 15.

And yet in ballet history Seymour stands alongside Margot Fonteyn. She, as much as Fonteyn, gave British ballet direction. Where Fonteyn is idolised for her grace and musicality, Seymour will forever be cast as the girl who brought danger and drama into British ballet - thanks to the uncanny empathy between her and the choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan, who imprinted her derring-do, both emotional and physical, on all his work. It would be odd then if she turned out to be a humdrum little cottonhead with nothing more on her mind than the state of her point-shoes. But Seymour wants, or says she wants, ordinariness.

'Look, I am only interesting because people have made up these fantastic stories about me. I am rather dull, I am not a raconteur, I am not particularly *witty*,' she said, angrily, as if berating herself as well as the world in general. 'Why can't people take ups and downs in life for granted? Practically everybody goes through them, yet I'm made to feel it's so *extraordinary*, so *exceptional*, and I think it sucks. The only difference is that I've been open about it.'

The ups and downs - or rather the downs - include three short-lived marriages. 'I was very single-minded about my career, and I think it was hard for the guys to get this on board. Then later when I wasn't dancing, I discovered what the guys wanted was my past kudos - when by then I was trying to be normal, trying to be what the others had missed.' A tight laugh. 'My timing was lousy.' The last divorce settlement was partly responsible for her bankruptcy in 1990; you can't help feeling that her ingenuousness has cost her dear.

The other perennial bugbear is more visible. Lynn Seymour's body doesn't look like the average ballerina's. 'I look like a marshmallow, I know.' Well, no, not at all, actually. She is small, slight, very much in ballet shape. But where most dancers look too thin for their bodices, Seymour has ample shoulders that look good *en décolleté*, what a critic once called Cleopatra arms, and legs that taper from full thighs to a pair of dainty, arched feet. Degas's dancers come to mind, that smell of intimacy.

She has reviled her own body throughout her career. 'You should have steel wire in the middle of you somewhere. I haven't. I have something more like sponge rubber,' she told an interviewer 30 years ago. Yet it was the sponge-rubber pliability, frequently described as 'silkenness', that inspired MacMillan and Ashton.

That tendency to do herself down, as if to preempt the worst, appears never to have left her. When she met, she seemed to take it for granted that a hatchet job was on the way; was oddly pleased at compliments, yet hospitable even when sensing attack.

'Did you always feel like an outsider here?' 'Yes, I did. And I still do.' And yet she has remained here, even

when most of her work was, or is, abroad. 'My sons are here.' I met two of them, open, bright, one a photography student, the other doing a science PhD.

'People don't see the pragmatic side, that I've raised three sons, all this' = and she spread her hands to take in her picturesque little house. 'I'm *not* tempestuous. I really resent this representation of me, because it colours people's perceptions, so they think this kind of loony is going to turn up.

'But don't people just assume an awful lot? That just because I'm not on stage I'm going through a bad time? I've had terrible letters from people saying, How dare you not be on stage? Like it was my *duty* to be up there. I feel a duty to my art, but only when I can do it well, not when I'm unprepared.'

I suspect this is what some have found hard to forgive in her, that the public didn't come first. 'I've never thought about public reaction. I didn't feel they were very important, matter of fact.' And she laughed slightly sheepishly. 'The important thing was doing what the choreographer wanted, and doing it well. I never gave a damn what anybody else thought.'

Arrogant words, perhaps, but Seymour struck me as utterly devoid of conceit. This duty to her art is essentially private, and it does not make her a team player. It may explain the strange shortage of contact nowadays between Seymour and the company for which she helped create a golden age, the Royal Ballet.

Last year she coached four ballerinas, including Sylvie Guillem and Altyнай Asylmuratova, in *A Month in the Country*, which Ashton made for her in 1976. But then 'Lesley Collier asked me to cast an eye on her *Swan Lake*, and I said, Listen, you'll have to check that out with head office, and she never came back. So they clearly put the kibosh on it. You don't know why, so you just think *tant pis*.'

She shows the same fatalism over one of the bitterest disappointments of her career, the notorious decision by the Royal Ballet not to let her dance the opening night of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1965, even though MacMillan had created it upon her and Christopher Gable.

'Well, we still don't know the bottom line on that.' Was she bitter? 'It wasn't... disappointing, it was very understandable that Margot and Rudolf should do it, and I could see that really clearly. I wasn't a particularly good *dancer* at that time, I'm terribly painfully aware of that. But I did have my own *thing*, which was probably a kind of go-for-it bravery.'

Has she little to thank the Royal Ballet for, then? 'Oh, I have everything to thank them for, my early opportunities, to be with Ninette and Fred, Kenneth, Cranko, Margot... But long before me there's a history of going for the institution rather than for the individual, and I don't think you can do that with art.'

But boo to the notion that a dancer is a slave to art. I hesitantly raised the subject of Gelsey Kirkland, the American ballerina whose descent into drugs and drink is as famous as her artistry.

'Gelsey's book was *terrible*, and I feel so sorry for her. She's one of the most divine dancers I've ever seen, but she's a real example of someone who didn't have any other influences that balanced her passion for the dance. She thought she must be transported all the time.

'You don't just magic up the ability to perform. Intent is 99.9 percent of it. Your job is to *do* the magic, not *feel* it.'

*Wittgenstein opens on Thursday*