

Dynasty

The Messerer family by Ismene Brown

When Carlos Acosta danced *Spartacus* with the Bolshoi Ballet in London last summer, the time and the place united the strands of a most extraordinary story in ballet, a story of peregrination, of dreadful reverses, of the pursuit of civilisation, of holding on to the best of human values in despairing times. This might, yes, describe Acosta's own story (captivatingly told in his new memoir *No Way Home* (see page 8) – but there is a more epic tale at issue here. It is the story of a dynasty of very great teachers and performers, the Messerers of Moscow.

Cuba, Moscow, London – the Messerers join up the world's great ballet schools. In Moscow Asaf Messerer became the first great teacher, his nephew Azary Plisetsky flew off from Russia to shape the academic style of Alonso's Cuban ballet, and now in London another of Asaf's nephews Mikhail (Misha) Messerer transmits the pure Russian style of Asaf's day to the international Royal Ballet troupe. Meanwhile Irek Mukhamedov, the Royal Ballet and Bolshoi superstar, owes his breakthrough to a third Asaf nephew, Naum Azarin-Messerer.

Acosta felt a strong sense of *déjà vu* when he danced with the Bolshoi. 'I was very inspired by taking class with the Bolshoi, how well everybody executed steps and how much common ground I felt with them. I could see a lot of resemblance to our school in Cuba. Early on I trained with Lazaro Carreño in Havana, and Lazaro studied at the Kirov under Pushkin, as well as being one of the dancers Azary Plisetsky was training to dance with Alicia Alonso. I could see the resemblance between that schooling Lazaro taught me and the Russian school.'

'Azary brought to the boys the jumps and the princeliness, the way you place your hand. Alicia believed that anything that went wrong in *pas de deux* was the boy's fault – Azary taught it that way. We learned where to put our hands at the age of 15, so by 18 or 19 you knew very well how to partner with care. Then when I started to take Misha Messerer's classes here in the Royal Ballet, I found it very pure, very traditional Russian schooling, and very kind in his approach.'

Kindness is a word that crops up repeatedly when dancers discuss the Messerer teachers, starting with Asaf, whose class was legendary at the Bolshoi. 'Asaf belongs on the Mount Olympus of ballet,' wrote his niece, the legendary ballerina Maya Plisetskaya in her 1994 autobiography *I, Maya Plisetskaya*. 'A brilliant dancer, he was the source of many technical tricks and pioneered a virtuoso style of solo male classical dance. An outstanding teacher – his class heals legs. I would hurry to his class almost every morning of my conscientious ballet life. His students included Galina Ulanova, Vladimir Vasiliev, Ekaterina Maximova. He is a quiet, steady and friendly man. Everyone loves him at the theatre.'

Asaf (1903-92) had started teaching at the Bolshoi when only 20, and he developed a class of rare logic and care. In 1954 he was put in charge of grooming the top dancers in the *classe de perfectionnement*. His method, progressing from exact delineation of the basic positions to exuberant jumps and turns, is preserved theatrically in his ballet *Class Concert*, which his nephew Misha Messerer staged for the Bolshoi in 2007 in a landmark production. It was the first time this ballet had been performed on the Bolshoi stage since



Alicia Alonso and Azary Plisetsky in the Russo-Cuban *Don Quixote*, 1968

it had been banished by the incoming Bolshoi director in 1964, Yuri Grigorovich. A thread that runs through the Messerer story almost to this day is the antipathy between Grigorovich and the Messerers. Asaf Messerer represented an academic purity of dancing style that the new winds blowing in the early Sixties in the Soviet Union decided was old-hat. Grigorovich was the energetic young creator of big, athletic, emotional modern ballets with earthy, turned-in runs and spectacular lifts, dancing on a massive scale that had little room for batterie or nuanced épaulement. Dancers who took Asaf's class under the new regime were seen as making an aesthetic statement against Grigorovich and they suffered for it. In time, though, official disapproval had the contrary result of sowing the Messerer seeds around the world.

But let us begin with the founder of the dynasty – a dentist, a cultured and religious man, Mikhail Borisovich Messerer (1866-1942), who lived and practised in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. His first wife, Sima, had borne him seven children – five surviving – when in 1907 Messerer moved his large family to Moscow.

In her life story Maya, his eldest grandchild, described this warm-hearted dentist in whose surgery she loved to play: 'Grandfather was not tall. Thick Brezhnev-like eyebrows, a massive nose, round bald head, well-fed, if not fat. He walked with dignity, playfully waving his carved stick with a figured top, which he rarely failed to use. He had much to be proud of. His fillings held a long time.'

So too did his cultured genes. Misha was not born when his grandfather died, but he heard endlessly about him from the family: 'He spoke eight languages – he decided to learn English in his seventies, just in order to read Shakespeare. He was a great fan of Moscow Arts Theatre, and

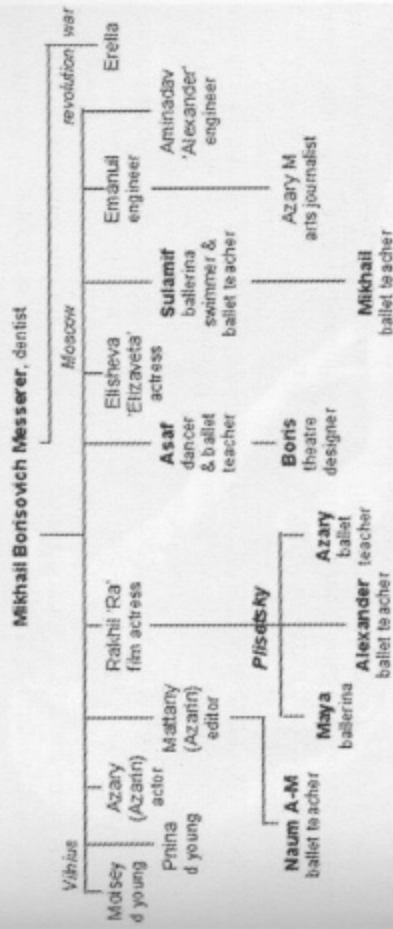
took his grandchildren to the theatre. When they came back from the play, he'd open the book of the play and ask them to comment. They'd then all play out the roles at home. He was very intelligent and artistic.'

Sima bore Mikhail ten children over some 25 years; when he was 74 he added an eleventh to his tribe by his second wife Raisa. Proudly Jewish, he gave all his children Biblical names, which led, says Maya, to 'cares and woes' in Soviet times as anti-Semitism mounted. (Some of the children adopted more Russian names to get work.) He died when he was 76, during the war in evacuation from Moscow in Kuibyshev, with his youngest child Erella just two. The Germans were on the rampage. He had lived through Imperial Russia, Bolshevism and the threat of a Nazi Russia. He had many blessings in his children's success – Asaf and Sulamif were Bolshoi Ballet stars, Azary, Rakhil and Elisheva all celebrated actors, and three sons in steadier jobs in engineering and publishing. Maya, the eldest grandchild, was promising to be another great dancer.

Still, the last years of Mikhail Borisovich's life were full of ghastly events in his family as Stalin ratcheted up his persecution of his own people: the sudden deaths of two sons, the arrest, torture and imprisonment of two other children and his son-in-law. Those were the times. He was not to know the tremendous flowering of his family in Moscow and world ballet that would take place over the rest of the century, nourished even more in adversity.

No doubt fed by his father's passion for theatre, Azary (1897-1937) was the first of five siblings to take to the theatre. He joined the Moscow Arts Theatre under the catchier name of Azary Azarin, and became one of Moscow's most distinguished dramatic actors. He died aged only 40 of a heart attack at the height of Stalin's terrors, strained by the closing of his beloved

THE MESSERER-PLISETSKY FAMILY



theatre and the arrest of his sister Rakhil's husband.

A year later in 1938, his brother Mattany (1898-1957), who also took the surname Azarin, was to suffer arrest, torture and eight years' imprisonment. The editor of a Communist newspaper, he had begun to be disillusioned by Stalin's bloody repressions, and his wife denounced him to the KGB. Inside prison theatre became his lifeline, but on his release at the end of the war he never recovered his health.

His son, Naum (1934-89), however, was growing up with the theatre gene firmly in place – he would become one of the family's six ballet teachers. In his capacity as ballet master to the Moscow Classical Ballet in the 1970s and 80s, he coached Irek Mukhamedov and Vladimir Malakhov, and both have acknowledged his seminal effect on their future stardom. Mukhamedov was a rising but not wildly ambitious young soloist inside this touring company when to universal amazement he swept the Grand Prix at the 1981 Moscow International Ballet Competition. According to Jeffrey Taylor's 1994 biography of Mukhamedov Naum Azarin had sensed that the lad was more than a 'jump-

ing machine' (although as it happens a jump that Naum created for Irek is enshrined in the choreography of MacMillan's *The Judas Tree*, MacMillan having much admired it when Irek showed it to him).

Taylor writes: '[Naum] would take Mukhamedov to his flat to show him videos of Rudolf Nureyev's performances in the West and urge him to watch how his fellow Tartar expressed character and mood through every step... These sessions were conducted in secrecy, usually with the curtains drawn, as Nureyev was at that time officially reviled in the Soviet Union, condemned as a traitor to his homeland.' Significantly, Mukhamedov noted that Naum's manner 'was both gentle and implacable; he would rarely raise his voice, but he would never give up.' This gentleness and implacability comes up again and again, like a family resemblance, among the great Messerer teachers of ballet: Asaf, Sulamif, the Plisetzky brothers Alexander and Azary, Naum Azarin-Messerer and Mikhail Messerer.

By the terrible time of war, Asaf and Sulamif were renowned and mature principals inside the Bolshoi Ballet. The

