

Princess on a pedestal



Photo Sasha Gusov

Sublime - or shallow? Darcey Bussell, star of the Royal Ballet, talks to Ismene Brown

Somehow all that sunny beauty has remained a promise of maturity still not fulfilled

SHE is the most recognisable ballerina in Britain. She is the face of the Royal Ballet today, as in her day was Fonteyn, to whom, for no sensible reason at all, she is frequently compared.

Few ballerinas have been placed on the pedestal so young as Darcey Bussell, OBE. Her face is everywhere. The dreamy princess's face, swooning among roses on a Royal Ballet poster. The svelte fashion model in *Vogue*. The pretty, unsophisticated face at the society parties snapped in *Hello!* Above all, the face that launches a thousand visions of their own ideal Odette or Aurora.

She was a star at 19, on the National Portrait Gallery's must-have list at 25, gonged the same year. She is out on her own for physical sumptuousness on stage, with a more naturally sublime gift than ballet has seen for many decades in this country.

But there is also a disappointment, that Bussell has not turned into a fascinating, dangerous artist, that somehow all that sunny beauty has remained a promise of maturity, still, at 27, not fulfilled.

The problem is that we know what ballerinas can do to us: Lynn Seymour, Fonteyn, Antoinette Sibley, Sylvie Guillem, can (or could) all reach into your head and spin it, leave you feeling helpless in their power. Another problem is that when Bussell was 19, Kenneth MacMillan, the great, probing choreographer, created a portrait of her in his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* which hinted at a dangerous and dark side to her that has never quite materialised.

Tomorrow, for the first time in six years, Bussell dances the part MacMillan created for her, Princess Rose, a virginal teenager put through something of a Freudian rough-house by a series of beastly men, before freeing a prince from a spell and inheriting her kingdom.

"They're sort of sexually abusing me, aren't they?" Bussell laughs unself-consciously, "Without a doubt, yah!" She is very striking, with that Bambi face and sharp little nostrils, but she exudes barely a trace of sex appeal. She has a wicked little way of characterising her rival, Guillem, aged 31, as "much older than me", and her slightly lahdida "yahs" and "brilliants" have the naive social aplomb you expect of someone 10 years younger. Recently she announced her engagement to a merchant banker, with whom she enjoys beach holidays and nightclubbing, and from whom she has a two-carat diamond ring of wonderful simplicity - and yet she seems hardly grown-up.

The artist Allen Jones painted her for the NPG, and was almost panicked by his inability to find a key to her character: "She's very self-contained, uncomplicated. I was aware of this very very highly tuned body above all, yet she's not very sexual. She was like a thoroughbred, really." His portrait shows her as a racehorse girl striding the world on powerful pointes.

MACMILLAN saw a different quality in her. His widow, Lady Deborah MacMillan, remembers him coming home and exclaiming, "This child is unaware of what she can produce."

He had spotted her at the Royal Ballet School. She was a late starter, at 13, but in three years had zoomed to the top rank of young dancers. Three years later, she was plucked from the corps de ballet of Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet by MacMillan to become the focus of a full-length fairy-tale ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*.

Bussell then was ardent, urgent, full of hope, as is blazingly obvious on the video of the ballet. "Actually I do think Rose was quite true to what I was like," she says. "That's a bit scary to think about... I didn't feel worried about the sexuality of the steps. It wasn't normal but it wasn't so shocking. Dancers are all very physical people and you don't go, 'eueugh, not nice'. It's only a fairy-tale.

"I did wonder a bit about the second act [in which she duets with the rapacious kings], because it was kind of pulling me apart when I thought, isn't this supposed to be a building act for me, to help me progress?"

MacMillan took a big gamble that Bussell could handle the job. He was frail from a recent heart attack, and on the defensive at Covent Garden. Ashton had recently died, and MacMillan was seen as "difficult" by comparison.

On that first night, as his widow remembers, "At the curtain this man who never liked even taking a call rushed forward to the audience, and shouted, 'Ballet is alive and well and living in London!' I almost fell off my chair. But it was absolute frustration at the way he had been seen by the ballet establishment as a great threat to the heritage. With *Pagodas* Kenneth was trying to show that he wasn't."

While it's tempting to see the ballet as a portrait of Bussell, it is just as much a projection of MacMillan's own introverted nature. The virginal innocent's rite-of-passage was something of a constant theme - Juliet, Anastasia, Manon, among others, had all gone through it. "Have you been in *love*, Darcey?" he would bark at Bussell in rehearsal. "Well, I *think* I have," she'd reply, frowning.

But whatever MacMillan's hopes that this tall childlike girl with the big voluptuous limbs could follow Seymour into the darker shadows of his creativity, Bussell has since then preferred the sunny side of the street.

"I'm naturally like that. I've always been the one to laugh things off. I enjoy my work and hopefully that does show. I probably don't take it as seriously as some, but because I'm enjoying it more. I don't want to feel deep and meaningful about it."

You might find the shortage of fantasy in Bussell's character, her lack of mystery and the gorgeous politeness of her dancing ultimately rather bland. Or you could argue that her pure grandeur and uniquely fast, creamy attack are more than enough. Choreographers do tend to home in on that unfussed serenity when making ballets around Darcey

"Yah, maybe a couple have put me on a pedestal," she agrees. "They have been elegant, long-limbed parts, but [she says with sudden unusual emphasis] I hope they've been womanly."

Womanly is how she looks when she dances with New York City Ballet, unusually exotic and mysterious by contrast with the American girls. It's tempting to hope that MacMillan's Rose still lurks there, that there is still more to come.