

Why I despair of the Kirov



Photo Roberto Frankenberg

Russia's greatest ballerina tells Ismene Brown about the chaos that denies her the roles she deserves

"I don't think that Russians dance better than other nationalities any more"

IT WAS a dowdy Marseilles hotel room with a grey Formica table on which are a bottle of ketchup, a half-eaten apple, some pots of Playdoh - and a thick bouquet of crimson roses, incongruously glamorous in this cheap setting.

So was the woman sitting at the table with me. She is extraordinary, with a dark, delicate face, sapphire and diamond earrings that look very real, and a worldwide reputation in her sphere that few have equalled. She is the Kirov's greatest ballerina, the equal of Sylvie Guillem in the world's eyes - and yet she earns £200 a month and has to plead for work at her own theatre. Her country has gone mad for money, she thinks - no one knows what ballet means to them any more.

Meeting Altnai Asylmuratova was a shock. I was not expecting that an artist whose performances are among the richest pleasures that life has to offer should be a tired, drained woman losing hope for the future of the once-great Kirov Ballet.

Even as she is about to dance in the company's Christmas *Nutcracker* season, which opens at the London Coliseum tonight, Asylmuratova expressed the utmost contempt for her artistic director Oleg Vinogradov.

New of bizarre events has been emerging from St Petersburg this year. The Kirov's last London visit, in summer 1995, was accompanied by declarations of poverty under the new Russia and disquiet about its artistic direction - Asylmuratova, whose performances set London's tongues wagging with excitement, was constantly downgraded in the casting, while Yulia Makhalina, Vinogradov's lover at the time, was relentlessly showcased.

Since then, further humiliation. Vinogradov has faced allegations of bribery and corruption alongside the Kirov Theatre's former director, Anatoly Malkov, spending three degrading days in prison, before the case was officially closed in summer without a verdict either way.

It was naturally the talking-point of 1996 for the Kirov dancers. Public prosecutors stated that Vinogradov was personally very rich even as the director was telling Britain that the massive company was so broke that he could pay its 210 dancers only £100-200 a month.

However, Asylmuratova says that Vinogradov lost their respect for other reasons besides - not least the suggestion last year, which he denied, that after being beaten up in the street he was considering running the Kirov Ballet from Washington.

After several long absences abroad, he is now under threat from the recent appointment of a new overall head at the Maryinsky Theatre, the conductor Valery Gergiev, who intends to shake things up.

According to Asylmuratova, the administration is so shambolic that last year she stopped asking permission to guest abroad: ironically, her foreign jaunts, she says, tend to stimulate a flurry of home roles that otherwise can be few and far between. When we met she was in Marseilles dancing with the Roland Petit Ballet for a week, off her own bat. "I ask nobody. I do things myself now."

Her engagement to lead English National Ballet's new *Swan Lake* at the Royal Albert Hall next summer was made similarly independently.

WITH her in France was her husband, the Kirov's superb principal man Konstantin Zaklinsky, who was minding their three-year-old, Anastasia (hence the Playdoh), while her mother was out performing. He was even ruder about Vinogradov than Asylmuratova. Like his wife ("She is the greatest dancer in the world!"), he is too fine an artist for the Kirov management to dismiss, especially since there is a desperate shortage of good men.

The couple both see a change in the soul of Russia, the way the scramble for dollars has made people colder, harder, "more mercantile", as Asylmuratova put it.

She was "so happy", she said, when perestroika was introduced 10 years ago, convinced that things would improve in art as well as in life. But "now you can buy anything if you have money - but we have not money. And because people see life can be richer, they want to see more *show* in the theatre, not so much art, and ballet is not *show*."

In contrast, she told me, some pensioners regularly bring her flowers every time they see her perform - "Big bunches, and I know that if they buy them they can't eat for a whole month. And I say, 'Why do it? It's not important.' And they say, 'For us it is important, because we cannot live without art, without ballet'.

"For most people now that has gone. I don't think Russians dance better than other countries any more. Paris, London, now very good companies. Before, maybe in the classical style we were a little bit better. OK we didn't have much money, but it was special to be artistic, it wasn't just business. Vinogradov is not an artist inside, he does the *business* of art. That's why everything else in the company is changing.

"I look at the new generation: they have wonderful bodies, physical talent no problem, but here [a gesture to her head] and here [heart] different. Not *artist*. They know what they have to do for a career, to reach this level, that level. But if you could ask them what do they read, what do they like in the art... *nothing*. Because when you see performers who you go 'aaahh' for, like Misha [Baryshnikov], like Rudy [Nureyev], you could speak with them about music, about art, about plays, about books. If you know more, you can give more. Now it's just *business*."

Now 35 and at her peak, sought by foreign companies, hemmed in by blind chaos at home, Asylmuratova feels torn in two. The Kirov's younger-age policy puts her under pressure; and abroad she is familiar with well-run theatres, cultured audiences (she finds London exceptionally so) and good money. But she said her attachment to her theatre and traditions was too strong for her to leave.

She longs for new, free Russia to value the art of ballet for itself, not for its potential for exploitation - whether political, as in Soviet days, or commercial, as now.

And at night, said Asylmuratova, she dreams of having Sylvie Guillem's legs - at 5ft 6in she is small compared to the six-footers among the newest Kirov ballerinas, for whom she constantly has to step aside.

"I love ballet, it's my life, I do my work truly. But I have been 17 years in the Kirov and I never feel free, never free and good. I don't want each time to have to come and say, 'Why haven't you given me a performance?' I am tired of that. I do everything I can for my theatre, not for the administration, but for the people who love me and because I love *art*."

It's a mark of Asylmuratova's greatness that she does not allow her loss of heart affect those wondrous performances.

"For me stage is another life. It's like a miracle, you know? I want to be inside this miracle, I want to *do* this miracle. Because without it, life is routine, grim, without colours. Sometimes I feel today I can't do it, I don't want to perform, I have no emotion. But when I step on stage, I feel something happen - better or worse, it says, 'go on'."

The Kirov Ballet at the London Coliseum from tonight.