

## A great leap forward for male dancers

**The venerated ballerina had better watch her step – a new programme at Sadler's Wells shows that men could be about to steal the limelight for good**

By Jessica Duchen

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Are men in ballet upwardly mobile? It certainly looks that way – and it isn't only the leaps. This week Ivan Putrov, the Ukrainian-born star dancer formerly of the Royal Ballet, is presiding over a programme at Sadler's Wells devoted to a celebration of male dancers. Entitled *Men in Motion*, it brings together a group of performers at the top of their game to showcase choreography made by and for men over 100 years. And it seems to suggest that ballet's male dancers may finally be starting to eclipse the ballerinas.

This isn't meant to sound anti-feminist – anything but. It's just that in ballet, the war of the sexes was for a long time famously unbalanced and it was (for once) the women who reigned supreme. Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Maya Plisetskaya, Margot Fonteyn, Sylvie Guillem, Darcey Bussell, Natalia Osipova – the list of great ballerinas is endless.

Ironically, it was a man who set ballet on its path towards the classical technique of today: King Louis XIV of France, who enjoyed starring in his own grand-scale ballets de cour (court ballets). Yet by the 19th century women were well established at the forefront of the art. They would often be aided and abetted on stage by a man as handsome prince or wicked wizard, functioning in part as a graceful form of forklift truck. When a fairy-tale prince does dance alone, he usually jumps and spins to strong, rhythmic music which sprays the atmosphere briefly with testosterone.

Great male dancers are nothing new, however. Since the days of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, we've never really been without them –

though they were in less plentiful supply. Vaslav Nijinsky was perhaps the first to reach superstar status, only to be thrown out of the Ballets Russes by his former lover, Diaghilev himself, when he elected to get married. Later Anton Dolin (real name: Patrick Kay, from Sussex) took on the premier danseur mantle – even if he was primarily recognised for being partner to the wonderful Alicia Markova (real name: Lilian Alicia Marks, from Finsbury Park). The adopted Russian names weren't coincidental. In Britain, at least, balletic recognition remained an uphill struggle, especially for men. It stayed that way for decades.

Until, that is, the high-profile defection from the USSR in 1961 of Rudolf Nureyev became the catalyst for an explosion of enthusiasm for male dancers. In Nureyev's wake there followed a gallon of new ballets inspired by his abilities; and more high-profile male stars with outstanding physical power and charisma. Mikhail Baryshnikov, Irek Mukhamedov, Carlos Acosta and most recently Ivan Vasiliev have all become global superstars. Nureyev inspired a generation, which in turn has gone on to inspire the next.

While in the former Soviet Union ballet was always a highly respected profession for men, you only have to watch a few minutes of Billy Elliot to be reminded that that hasn't been the case in the UK, where prejudiced sniggers about "men in tights" have not exactly kept pace with the developments on stage. Still, the runaway success of Billy Elliot itself has played a part in helping to shift popular attitudes; so, too, has Matthew Bourne's smash-hit version of Swan Lake, with its all-male corps de ballet and two male leads.

But perhaps one of the most intriguing things about ballet's male roles for changing times is that they appear to have adapted to the concept of the New Man. Now roles for men often embrace aspects far beyond extrovert display, with choreographers choosing to explore a much-increased range of emotions, from extreme violence (like Kenneth MacMillan's *The Judas Tree*) to introversion or tenderness. Putrov's line-up acknowledges this, with works that reveal not only virtuosity, but male dancers' capacity to evoke elemental enchantment, psychological drama and sheer aesthetic, physical beauty.

The influence of an English dancer – Anthony Dowell – was crucial to the rise of the lyrical man on stage. While those phenomenal Russians whirled and soared their way to stardom, Dowell (who later became director of the Royal Ballet) inspired a different style of choreography during his heyday from the mid 1960s to around the mid 1980s: thoughtful, controlled, ecstatically poetic. Those qualities have proved perhaps even harder to match than the obvious power and razzmatazz of his peers. Maybe it is the recognition of the gentler side of male strength, the full gamut of their psychology, that has enabled the men to round out their art and gain that extra edge of supremacy.

Putrov has assembled an array of artists who can dance the socks off any ballerina of their choice: Sergei Polunin, the fast-rising star of the Royal Ballet; Igor Kolb, principal dancer of the Mariinsky; Semyon Chudin from the Bolshoi; the aptly-named soloist Andrei Merkuriev; and Daniel Proietto, winner of a

Critics Circle award. The evening's chief female star, to redress some of the balance, is Elena Glurdjidze of English National Ballet.

His dazzling programme should show us a kaleidoscopic panorama of male expertise across 100 years of dance. It starts in 1911 with *Le Spectre de la Rose*, created by Mikhail Fokine for Nijinsky and based on a poem by Théophile Gautier. A girl returns from a ball and drifts off to sleep in her chair, still holding a rose. Its spirit arrives to dance with her, leaping in through the open window; and with that leap, Nijinsky made history. Russell Maliphant's *AfterLight (Part One)* is a counterpoint to the Fokine – a modern-day tribute to Nijinsky, his fragile soul and his own adventurous, stylised choreography.

Then there is man as narcissist: the myth of Narcissus, who drowns while gazing upon the beauty of his own reflection in the water, is evoked in a solo from *Narcisse* by the experimental Russian choreographer Kasyan Goleizovsky (1892-1970). Man as angel – more or less – enters with Gluck's *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*, choreographed by Ashton for Dowell, who is teaching it to Putrov especially for the occasion. It hasn't been seen on these shores for 30 years. This long-absent work rubs shoulders with the premiere of a brand-new one: Putrov's first venture into choreography, *Ithaca*, is based on a C P Cavafy poem and set to music by Paul Dukas, with designs by the Turner Prize-nominated artist Gary Hume.

A more controversial note appears with *Remanso* by Nacho Duato, the Spanish choreographer who for the past year has been shaking things up considerably as artistic director of the Mikhailovsky Ballet in St Petersburg. *Remanso*, choreographed in 1997, presents its trio of men in a homoerotic triangle that some have suggested could reflect an unwritten scenario about Aids.

The evening should be a grand display of male dancers as magnificent, all-round, self-aware artists. Strange that we still need to remember to celebrate them? Maybe. But it's a great excuse for a feast of wonderful dancing. As Cavafy's poem says: "As you set out for Ithaca, hope the voyage is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery."

**Men in Motion, Sadler's Wells Theatre, London EC1 (0844 412 4300) 27 to 29 January**