

Princess of the Pagodas: who can step into Darcey Bussell's shoes?

As the Royal Ballet prepares to revive Kenneth MacMillan's three-act ballet after a 13-year gap, its finest principals are hoping to emerge from the shadow of their famous predecessor, who made the lead role her own.

Jessica Duchen, Saturday 02 June 2012

It is 13 years since Kenneth MacMillan's *The Prince of the Pagodas* was seen at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Now it is back: Dame Monica Mason, in her final season as the Royal Ballet's artistic director, was determined to revive the late, great choreographer's last three-act ballet. Maybe it has been absent so long partly because its identity is linked strongly to its original star, Darcey Bussell. She was all of 19 when MacMillan plucked her out of the corps de ballet at Sadler's Wells to create its leading role, Princess Rose, at Covent Garden. In effect, she started at the top and stayed there.

Bussell officially retired from ballet in 2007, but maintains celebrity activities aplenty, such as performing *Viva la Diva* with Katherine Jenkins and now judging *Strictly Come Dancing*. A few weeks ago the Royal Academy of Dance appointed her its president. At the Royal Ballet, though, nobody has quite stepped into her shoes. It's possible that her stardom cast a long shadow over the dancers in her wake.

Some of the company's finest principals are now taking on Princess Rose. But they're not household names. At least, not yet. Marianela Nuñez dances the first two performances; Sarah Lamb is hot on her heels; and Lauren Cuthbertson should have completed the trio, but is battling an injury.

Nuñez, 30, has been a principal for a decade, promoted when she was barely 20 – just like Bussell, except that rather more fuss has surrounded this fact with the latter. Hailing from Buenos Aires, she joined the Royal Ballet at 16. "The Prince of the Pagodas was the first ballet I saw the company dance," she remembers. "I went to

Orange County to audition for them while they were on tour, and saw the performance that evening. I can hardly believe I'm dancing it now."

Her artistry blends a meltingly warm personality with extraordinary physical flexibility and deep sensitivity as an actress. One critic summed up her Swan Lake with lyrical words: "Every detail tells a story, every gesture sings, every step is luminous with emotion."

She and her husband, fellow principal dancer Thiago Soares, also won a special place in the audience's affections when he proposed to her on stage at the end of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Sarah Lamb, 31, rose to prominence in the Boston Ballet before crossing the Atlantic to join the Royal Ballet. Whether she is dancing MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*, Balanchine's "Rubies" (from *Jewels*) or Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*, there's no mistaking her special mix of streetwise glamour, timeless classical finesse and elfin vulnerability – and there's a razor-sharp perfectionism about her technique. An injury in 2008 nearly felled her, though; she broke her foot in four places and at first feared she might never dance again. "I was back on stage in nine months and I'm doing fine," she declares.

Lauren Cuthbertson, 28, is the Royal Ballet's only British principal ballerina. Last year she was much in the spotlight when she created the role of Alice in Christopher Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Her long limbs verge on the Darceyesque and she excels in high drama: triumphs include a breathtaking *Romeo and Juliet* and a subtle, sharp and sophisticated *Manon*. She has had more than her fair share of struggles, though; in 2009 she was struck down by glandular fever and a bout of ME. It seems cruel for her now to lose *The Prince of the as well*.

Were these three wonderful dancers simply overshadowed to begin with by the megastar in front? Nuñez, who joined the company while Bussell was at her peak, insists that she never felt she lacked opportunities: "It was incredible having Darcey around – she was a real inspiration," she says. "And we are lucky here because there are so many performances and everyone gets their chance."

Even if that was the case in the company, it wasn't necessarily how the audience and the media saw things. Bussell and her tremendous popularity were a one-off phenomenon, with an appeal that went far beyond the reach of most ballet stars. Besides her apparently limitless technique, she was instantly recognisable by her statuesque silhouette alone; and she radiated something instinctive and elemental, with a natural, beaming openness that won hearts in

seconds. MacMillan earmarked her while she was still at the Royal Ballet School.

"It's like an Olympic athlete: she was the top of the top," says Sarah Lamb. "She had that thoroughbred quality about her. She could do everything; she had a beautiful physique and it was just all there to be moulded together and to see what he could do with her potential." And it didn't hurt that Bussell is British: "The audience really embraced that about Darcey," Lamb says. "They're so proud of her."

There's a British significance to *The Prince of the Pagodas*, too, because the music is Benjamin Britten's only full-length ballet score. It was written for John Cranko to choreograph in the 1950s, but then fell into disuse. As a major work by the UK's leading composer, it threw a challenge to the country's top ballet company. Macmillan considered it for decades before putting the idea into practice.

Princess Rose – heroine of a coming-of-age fairy tale that blends Freud, King Lear and *Beauty and the Beast* – was moulded entirely for Bussell's distinctiveness, with scissoring legs, sashaying arms, gorgeous épaulement and high extensions to exploit the moving sculpture of those long, long limbs.

Can another dancer make all that her own? "I love having the chance to dance in that way, with everything so expansive," says Nuñez. "Darcey had an incredibly powerful technique, yet at the same time she could look so soft and vulnerable. It's a wonderful challenge. And as a dancer, knowing what this work meant – a huge ballet by MacMillan that really put Darcey on the map – it's quite something."

But it's worth reflecting that without Kenneth MacMillan, and without *The Prince of the Pagodas*, Bussell might not have won such a high-profile public image so quickly. Synergy like that can't be manufactured: it either happens or it doesn't. There may not be a ballerina at the moment with quite the repute of Bussell, but neither is there a senior choreographer in Britain with the towering status of a MacMillan to help create one.

It's five years since Bussell retired and high time for her successors to step out of the shadows. Perhaps *The Prince of the Pagodas* can at least provide a stepping stone. "It's a big deal when a ballet hasn't been seen for so long," Nuñez says. "Now we're all dying to go out and perform it. I think it's going to be very special."

'The Prince of the Pagodas', Royal Opera House, London (020 7304 4000) 2 to 29 June