



Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev: a passionate pas de deux - in life and art

They are a dazzling dance partnership on stage, and a couple off it. As they prepare for a guest appearance at the Royal Opera House, Jessica Duchen talks to them about the challenges of living and working together

By Jessica Duchen Tuesday, 13th August 2013

Ballet loves a star partnership and none more so than that of Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev, the Russian duo who are firing up audiences across the globe.

The pair, a couple off-stage as well as on, began their careers with the Bolshoi Ballet. Though they left in 2011, they are returning to it for one guest appearance in London this summer, in *Flames of Paris*. It was here, on the stage of the Royal Opera House, that they shot to joint international stardom in 2007 when the Bolshoi's then artistic director, Alexei Ratmansky, cast them for the opening night of *Don Quixote*. When they reprised the roles during the company's visit in 2010, *The Independent's* dance critic commented on their outrageous charm and astounding technique, and added: "By the time we got to the curtain calls, the audience was standing and screaming for them."

Since then, matters have moved on apace. Two years ago, the duo joined the Mikhailovsky Ballet in St Petersburg, which allowed them time for plentiful guest appearances, and they also have contracts at American Ballet Theatre. Now Osipova is becoming a principal with the Royal Ballet in London; Vasiliev, though, has not been signed too. Apparently he will live in the UK with her, and their joint guest appearances elsewhere will include Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* at La Scala, Milan; but it is possible that their individual careers may be taking them in different directions.

"It's always happened that we dance together and not together – it's normal but we love to dance together, and if we have a choice, of course we want to," says Osipova, with Vasiliev translating for her. "But when we have different work, we must go this way and it's no problem. We've danced together for a long time and it's easy, but when we dance with different partners, we study more. It's good for us professionally." Osipova, 27, and Vasiliev, 24, seem a very modern young couple, devoted yet independent. She is petite, pale-skinned and ebony-haired, stylish in a leather jacket; he, the more extrovert of the two, looks relaxed in jeans and black T-shirt. Despite jetlag, they are just back from a walk, one of their rare moments off duty; they work hard, but do not seem to play commensurately hard as well. "We watch movies and we sleep," Vasiliev says. "And in

Australia, we went to the zoo and saw koalas.” They are engaged, but if they have wedding plans they aren’t saying. “We have lots of ideas, but nothing to tell,” he smiles.

Nor will they comment on the recent string of scandals at the Bolshoi, which include a brutal acid attack on the artistic director, Sergei Filin, and a number of high-level sackings and resignations; the latest to depart is the general manager, Anatoly Iksanov. The troubled company, in the middle of several weeks of performances in London, will no doubt be pleased to see its former stars back again, if only for one night.

Osipova grew up in Moscow and turned to ballet after a back problem forced her to abandon gymnastics. “I didn’t like ballet at first,” she says. “It was only when I was 15 and we started to go on stage that I began to love it.”

Vasiliev was born in Vladivostok; when his elder brother was taken to folk-dance classes, four-year-old Ivan insisted on joining in. He took to ballet the moment he first saw some, aged seven. Later, he trained in Minsk before scooping a string of top competition prizes and joining the Bolshoi in 2006 with a widespread reputation as a teenage wunderkind. The pair met for the first time in the Bolshoi Theatre: “We were very young; I was 17,” Vasiliev says. “It wasn’t some explosion or fanfare; no, we were partners, we met and we started to rehearse.”

Being off-stage partners does not make everything simpler at work, though. “It’s easy on stage,” says Vasiliev, “because if something happens, we both understand immediately and we can deal with it. But in rehearsing we can have, like, scandal because we are family and you can say something and it’s difficult. But it’s fun because in your family you want to push more; with a different partner you can’t say, ‘Give me more.’” He adds: “We have danced for a long time together, and I think when we dance together we must dance perfectly. We mustn’t make mistakes.”

“There are a lot of problems before a show,” he adds, teasing his fiancé. “Natasha feels everything that’s a problem, because she is a pessimist and I am an optimist. She always thinks, ‘I have a problem.’ I always think, ‘No problem, everything is fine.’ Before a show we’re always nervous, but after it we are always happy.”

Their qualities as dancers complement one another. Both excel in dramatic roles, yet mix this with virtuoso daring that seems to ignore the boundaries of the possible. They pack a punch with their electrifying stage presences; and in jumps, gravity seems an irrelevance. The delicate-looking yet ferociously strong Osipova can hold a perfect balance for many breath-stealing extra moments or deliver extended chains of fouettés with dazzling precision and placement. Vasiliev, stocky and muscular, can execute twizzles in mid-air that are so astonishing you’re left wondering if they were for real; in multiple spins (he’s been known to do 10 in one pirouette) he can slow down towards the finish with control akin to a racing driver.

“It’s not only technique,” says Vasiliev. “When you put something into this technique, your spirit you can do this. In rehearsals, you can’t. I can rehearse one thing, then go on stage and do it completely differently and absolutely more, and I don’t know how and I don’t know why. But something inside pushes me, like, ‘Come on, come on!’ And I say: ‘OK, come on...’”

Osipova, too, wants to push herself beyond limits; that was possibly one thing that attracted her to the Royal Ballet when she made her debut with them last year in Swan Lake, replacing Tamara Rojo, who had departed to become artistic director of English National Ballet.

“It was a nervous moment because I had only just started to do this ballet,” she says. “In Russia, the style is a little bit different for Swan Lake – maybe you must be a tall, blonde woman with long legs.

“The Royal Ballet’s production was a new version for me, and it was the first time I had done a performance with them. So it was a difficult situation, but good partners and good teachers helped me very much. Now I feel this ballet can be more lifelike, more true and more dramatic. In Russia, when I come to this performance I am afraid to think like this. I think more about the positions and I would be afraid to go outside it, to open up, to go towards something more.”

Her first role as a member of the Royal Ballet will be in Kenneth MacMillan’s Romeo and Juliet: she dances the eponymous heroine, partnered by Carlos Acosta. She will be arriving not a moment too soon for the company: since Rojo’s departure, three more of its top ballerinas have also left. Leanne Benjamin and Mara Galeazzi have retired from the stage, and this summer a further blow materialised with the high-profile resignation of Alina Cojocaru, together with her partner Johan Kobborg. Cojocaru has subsequently announced that she is off to join Rojo’s ENB. Under these testing circumstances, the Royal is fortunate to have secured a star as compelling as Osipova.

Moving companies, though, is not without its challenges. The Bolshoi’s distinctive style – larger-than-life, with thrilling, open extensions and unquenchable virtuosity – is quite a contrast from the Royal Ballet’s, which is somewhat more restrained and lyrical. Osipova and Vasiliev have found themselves having to adjust to different traditions around the world, from New York to Australia. And they love it. “To dance in just one style is not interesting,” says Vasiliev, “but it’s very interesting to change the approach, because when we are young, when we have power and energy, we must learn and try these things.”

Osipova adds that the necessary adaptations cannot happen in a hurry: “When you come to a company you must study with the company’s teachers and learn the production,” she says. “You need a couple of weeks.” That sounds fast, and she admits that though you can’t do everything, you must be touched by the important things within the new style. “This is interesting for the company and for us too, because we change.”

The couple say they are pleased to be dancing Flames of Paris in London with the Bolshoi, not least because of their loyalty to its choreographer, Ratmansky. “We love Alexei so much; he’s the best person I know,” Vasiliev says. “He never screams. He’s so intelligent and so peaceful, but he’s always right. And he can be in the studio five or six hours and doesn’t stop; but when he asks you if you’re tired, you say, ‘I’m OK, continue!’”

As to the future of ballet in these troubled times, Osipova declares: “It’s very important that ballet doesn’t lose its soul. Because it’s not sport, it’s not only physical. It’s theatre, it’s true art.” Vasiliev laughs, though. “We just dance,” he grins.

Bolshoi Ballet, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000; roh.org.uk/bolshoi) to 17 August. Osipova and Vasiliev perform 'Flames of Paris' on 16 August