A TALK ON BALLET WITH CLEMENT CRISP

The interview was conducted by OKSANA KARNOVICH *and Prince* NIKITA LOBANOV-ROSTOVSKY

Clement Crisp – a highly authoritative British ballet critic and The Financial Times columnist – has served the art of Terpsichore, the Muse of dance, by writing for many years. He formerly associated with distinguished cultural figures, observed the formation of English national ballet, had friends among its founders – Dame Ninette de Valois, Dame Marie Rambert, ballet dancers from Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Sir Frederick Ashton and other great dancers of Britain. It is natural that a prominent art collector of Russian stage design of 'the Silver Age' and connoisseur of choreographic art Prince Nikita Dmitrievich Lobanov-Rostovsky after his move to the UK became close friends with Clement Crisp. Clement has kindly invited us to talk about the 'golden age' of English ballet to his own cosy flat at Central London, decorated with presents from his favourite ballerinas – Dame Alicia Markova, Lubov Tchernicheva and many others.

O.K. Why and how did you become a ballet critic?

C.C. I grew up in Limpsfield, a village in the county of Surrey, 30 miles from London. In 1943, for my 11th birthday, my parents (I was an only child) asked me what I would like for a birthday present. "A visit to the ballet". (I had been reading two books by a most distinguished ballet critic – Arnold Haskell – who had fallen in love with ballet while watching the early Diaghilev Ballets Russes seasons and had produced several books about classical dancing, and a brilliant biography of Diaghilev. His early book "Balletomania" told the story of his obsession and made a whole new audience in Britain for the very idea of ballet, and in 1939/40 he had written a brilliant explanatory volume – "Ballet" – which was published by Penguin Books, a notable enterprise which produced very popular, very cheap, paper-bound editions of famous novels and educational volumes about history, science, the arts. This Penguin Books Publishing was a superb enterprise, wide-ranging in its subjects, all its authors' distinguished writers and authorities on their subjects. Haskell's volume for Penguin Books – "Ballet" – appeared in 1938/39 – just as our seven-year-old Sadler's Wells Ballet (which was to turn into our now Royal Ballet) was starting to make real progress, with Frederik Ashton as choreographer, with that great woman Ninette de Valois as director, and with the young Margot Fonteyn just starting to show her gifts. Haskell's enthusiasm, his passionate love for ballet, was infectious – and aged 12 years I caught it. (And have never lost it after all these decades!) And just as war was to start in 1939 I was fascinated by Haskell's writing and his enthusiasm and great understanding and knowledge. At the time, Ballet in England was starting to gain a national identity, albeit the Ballets Russes companies of Colonel de Basil, and then of Rene Blum with Leonid Miassine, had tremendously popular seasons every year in London until 1939, when these tours were no longer possible. By 1943 we had been at war for 4 years and the Sadler's Wells Ballet had become very, very popular, touring the provinces and playing London seasons: the general public grew to love ballet, and despite air-raids, shortages of all kinds of materials, despite air-raids and rationing of food and materials, and the loss of male dancers to the armed forces, the Sadler's Wells Ballet was vastly popular, creative, and wining a new public for ballet. So, for my 12th birthday I asked to go to the ballet – to see the Sadler's Wells troupe in London. All was arranged for a matinee. On the day – 21 September 1943 – I came down to breakfast. My mama said "You look like death warmed-up! What's the matter?" "Nothing, nothing", I said, but my temperature was taken: 103 degrees fever. Our doctor came. "Chicken-pox!". Adieu ballet!! The ballet treat was postponed, and at last, a month later, my mama took me to a matinee in London by the Sadler's Wells Ballet. (At each side of the proscenium arch was a warning light: red signified an air-raid; green an "all clear". During subsequent visits – alone and now a dedicated balletomane – aged 12/13 – there were matinees when the red light flashed "on". (These were the days of the German flying bombs ("doodlebugs"). No one left the theatre. The dancers went on dancing, the orchestra went on playing – under the baton of Constant Lambert who was a great conductor, a brilliant composer, and a man of brilliant intellect, vital to the development of our national ballet – and we went on watching. Bliss! "Swan Lake" act 2 with Fonteyn (how blue the lighting!); a ballet by Robert Helpmann (wonderful design and Helpmann a vivid, vivid actor/dancer). And Frederick Ashton's "Façade" – wildly funny, with William Walton music, and Helpmann gloriously naughty as a tango dancer: the audience (loving every moment, like me) convulsed with laughter. (I can still see him and Fonteyn in my mind's eye – and still laugh at the memory.

P.L-R. What is your favourite performance of the classical heritage, great classical repertory?

C.C. During these years I started to learn about the great classical repertory, and something about classical dancing – but it was the visits of the Mariinsky Ballet from 1961 onwards that taught me the most about the old repertory: the staging's of "Swan Lake", of "Bayaderka" and "The Sleeping Beauty" revealed so much – the glories of style and clarity and harmony and a spiritual integrity that I saw in the Vaganova schooling, in the performances of sublime dancers: Yury Solovyov (a unique, marvellous talent) and Kolpakova, Makarova, Ayupova, Chenchikova, Asylmuratova, Semenyaka, Baryshnikov, Kunakova (whom I adored in the second variation in "Paquita") and so many more; all so varied and so splendid in their gifts – and not least and always the Mariinsky corps de ballet of Shades in "Bayaderka". And Maximova and Vasiliev who dazzled us in the early seasons by the Bolshoy Ballet in London. And Plisetskaya as Kitri! – and as a fascinating Juliet in her first London season (And, in the very first Kirov visit to London in 1961, the appearance – the elegance, the nobility – of Oleg Sokolov as the Prince in "Sleeping Beauty": our Covent Garden audience applauded and needed him repeat the latter part of the Prince's solo in Act III). And a brief visit to London by Alla Shellest and Konstantin Shatilov – with a small concert group of dancers – years prior to the first revelatory Boshoi Ballet visit in 1956. (As important to the West as the first Diaghilev season). And that first glimpse of Russian ballet when, in 1946 just as the war had ended, Violetta Prokhorova from the Bolshoi married an Englishman, Harold Elvin, and was able to come to England and joined our Sadler's Wells Ballet as it moved into the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Such warmth of presence and clarity of style.

Clement Crisp, Oksana Karnovich, Prince Nikita Lobanov-Rostovski

O.K. What is the difference between the production of "Sleeping beauty" at the Mariinsky and at the Royal Ballet?

C.C. The differences between the Mariinsky/Kirov staging of "The Sleeping Beauty" and the Royal Ballet version (as with all our local stagings of the "classics") are sometimes slight, sometimes considerable. It was to the young Vic-Wells Ballet's enormous benefit that Ninette de Valois was able to gain stagings from Nikolay Sergeyev, the former regisseur at the Mariinsky Theatre who had fled Russia following the 1917 Revolution, bringing the theatre's precious Stepanov notations of the ballet repertory with him. These he had used as and when he could to stage this precious old repertory. (I wonder if he staged the abbreviated version of "Bayaderka's" Shades which Spessivtseva produced in Paris in the early 1930-s with Serge Peretti as Solor. In 1932/3 Lydia Lopokova – by then living in London with her husband John Maynard Keynes – told Ninette de Valois that Sergeyev was "starving" in Paris and could stage "Coppelia" and "The Nutcracker" for de Valois' infant Vic-Wells (later Sadler's Wells, later still our Royal Ballet). De Valois thus engaged Sergueyev's notations for "Giselle" in 1934, with Alicia Markova), "Nutcracker", "Swan Lake" (all with the wonderful Markova as ballerina) and an ill-designed (by Nadia Benois) "Sleeping Beauty" in 1939 for the young Fonteyn. All these by 1939: a brilliant acquisition to give de Valois' young company a proper grounding in the great masterpieces of 19th century classic ballet in their Petersburg recensions. Ninette de Valois told me that she obtained these crucial versions for her then small company because she knew that she could expand the patterns and ensembles later on, when she had a larger company. These were the classic foundations of our National Ballet. Dame Ninette was infinitely wise! And far-seeing!!! And blessedly optimistic!!! But also secure and sure in her vision for an "English Ballet" as she called it then. Genius was hers. (Curiously, Sergueyev was engaged

just after the war ended in 1945, in staging "Bayaderka" for another, not very distinguished British troupe – "International Ballet" – and the production was cancelled just before the first night. No explanation was given.

O.K. Please, tell us about the Olga Spessivtseva?

C.C. But what is fascinating is Spessivtseva's training. Alicia Markova, our great ballerina – who worked for Diaghilev, was the sustaining ballerina for the early seasons of the Vic-Wells ballet, was the reason for those early stagings of "Giselle" and "Swan Lake" which gave such impetus to the very young Vic-Wells Ballet – had worked with Spessivtseva, knew her artistry and temperament. She told me of the very demanding daily class that Spessivtseva followed (never company class with Diaghilev's troupe!). In early 1940/.41 Markova was the most significant and popular ballerina – together with Alexandra Danilova – in America, and when in New York she always took private class daily with Vincenzo Celli, an outstanding pupil of Maestro Cechetti (of whom Markova had been a devoted pupil as a young dancer). Markova invited Spessivtseva to join these private classes, and in return Spessivtseva started to show Markova her own daily class – the Vazem class that she followed each day of her performing life – and which Markova described to me as "very, very demanding". Subsequently, Keith Kester, an English dancer – and later an important teacher at the Royal Academy of Dancing in London, where I knew him – told me that he had partnered Spessivtseva in "The Firebird" on a tour of South America, and had observed her daily Vazem class, about whose difficulty he spoke to me. Are there former dancers/teachers in St.Petersburg and Moscow who know of the details of this class? Among the ballerinas whom

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I saw during the 1940s and 1950s, one especially gave me immense joy in her artistry: Nina Vyrubova.

P.L-R. Tell us, pleases, about your meeting with Nina Vyrubova?

C.C. Nina Vyrubova was born in Gourzouf (Crimea) in 1921 and died in Paris in 2007. She arrived in Paris as a young child, was inspired by seeing Pavlova dance in 1931 and was taught by great emigree ballerinas in Paris: Egorova, Trefilova, Preobrazhenskaya, and later by Viktor Gzovsky and Serge Lifar. Her career blossomed when she was invited by Roland Petit to dance with his Ballets des Champs Elysees in 1945 (she appeared, unforgettably lovely – as I recall – and mysterious in "Les Forains".) She was a beautiful woman, a sublime interpreter of many roles- most gloriously in Balanchine's "Night Shadow" ("La Sonnambula") – and heart-rending in Viktor Gsonsky' staging of La Sylphide. She was a leading danseuse etoile in the Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas and then at the Paris Opera'. Like many another ballet-goer, I worshipped her artistry, her emotional subtlety, her musicality, the air of melancholy beauty that sometimes touched her performances, her impeccable musical sense in phrasing a dance, and her bravura technique in certain show-piece choreographies: she and Rosella Hightower and Serge Golovine were marvels in the Pas de trois from "Paquita" that Balanchine stage for the de Cuevas Ballet. As an etoile at the Paris Opera she danced much choreography by Lifar, who greatly admired her classic style and her mysterious emotional power – and her beauty. She was sublimely witty and elegant in the "La Cigarette" variation in Lifar's tremendous show-piece "Suite en blanc", set to music from Lalo's "Namouna", and staged both at the Paris Opera and in the repertory of the Marquis de Cuevas ballet company. She was a great artist and a sublime ballerina. Nina Vyrubova – the subject, incidentally of a brilliant film by the French film-maker Dominique Delouche ("Les Films de la Prieuré").

O.K. Tell us, pleases, about Alicia Markova and Serge Lifar?

C.C. Markova was a dear friend and an inspiring ballerina whose career I saw from 1948 onwards. Lifar I knew – though not well – and I saw his career from 1947 onwards and watched his choreographies at the Paris Opera. I have written extensive articles about both of them in the scholarly British journal DANCE RESEARCH (The Journal of the Society for Dance Research) which is published by the Edinburgh University Press; 22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF. Scotland. UK. I suppose that copies of these journals are held in libraries in Russia.

P.L-R. Who, in your opinion, had a great influence on the formation of British ballet?

C.C. Two women – Marie Rambert and Ninette de Valois effectively made English ballet in the 1920s and early 1930s. Rambert, Marie (Cyvia/ Myriam Rambam or Ramberg: 1888–1982) was Polish. Took up dancing after seeing Isadora Duncan. Studied at Hellerau (Germany) with Jacques-Emile Dalcroze (: Eurhythmics: his system of musical education through movement). There Diaghilev and Nijinsky saw her while in search of someone to help Nijinsky understand the score for "Le Sacre du printemps" (Stravinsky) which he was intending to stage for the Diaghilev Ballets Russes (1913). Rambert worked for Diaghilev – she told me that the Nijinsky choreography was a work of genius and that Nijinsky, rehearsing the final sacrificial dance with Maroussia Piltz, the danseuse whom he cast for the role, was vastly more moving and intense that she! (Rambert was "in love" with Nijinsky). Her career as soloist dancer – in a kind of Isadora-Duncan style – did not flourish. She came to London in 1914, and four years later married the playwright Ashley Dukes. He had opened a small theatre – the Mercury Theatre in Islington, north London, and here Rambert opened a ballet school which soon developed into a theatre where she might show her pupils' abilities. (NB: the stage was 6 metres square!!!!) An inspiring teacher and an awe-inspiring personality, Rambert drove certain of her pupils into making dances which were staged at the Mercury Theatre and formed a small ensemble. Rambert inspired, goaded her students, and there emerged from her school and classes several choreographers who achieved fame, significance and even greatness: Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Andree Howard, Frank Staff etc. Her performing group – The Ballet Club – later Ballet Rambert, now (simply) Rambert – was very important in making British ballet during the next 90 years! Ninette de Valois (1898–2001) was born Edris Stannus in Ireland, of an Anglo-Irish military family. She learned dancing as a child, and – in England – became a professional dancer. She was well-trained – not least by Enrico Cecchetti –and after some years dancing in commercial theatres, joined Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1923. This was a revelatory experience – opening this very gifted,

Nina Vyrubova

intelligent young woman's eye to Diaghilev's ideas about stagings, about choreography, about European culture, about the potential of ballet as an art, and about the nature of dance in the theatre. (She worked with Balanchine and Miassine in the Ballet Russes). After 2 years she returned to London and opened a ballet school. This flourished. The death of Diaghilev in 1929 seemed disastrous to the world of ballet, but de Valois had already taken steps towards a hope: that of making an "English" ballet. In a poor part of south London – at Waterloo – there was a theatre, The Old Vic, which had been operated for decades by a woman of rare and inspiring gifts, Lilian Baylis. For 20 years she had run this theatre as a stage where the local working-class population could see serious classical drama and good opera in decent stagings, with the very best performer she could afford. (And money was very hard to come by!). Miss Baylis – always referred to by her devoted working-class audience as "The Lady" – was a woman of devout Christian faith, and her ideal was to provide the best of theatre and opera for her working-class audience. And she succeeded! Ninette de Valois, understanding this as a matter of national identity, went to see her, impressed her, was offered the chance of staging any dances there might be in operas, with the bait that – as soon as she had enough funds – Miss Baylis proposed opening a new theatre in Islington, North London, and this Sadler's Wells Theatre would provide a home for Miss Baylis's opera company and for the ballet troupe that Miss de Valois hoped to build on the foundations of her school – to make an English Ballet! Amazingly, the plan worked. From the Rambert studios and the Old Vic/ Sadler's Wells enterprise there emerged dancers, choreographers, a school and a national identity and a new audience for British ballet and opera, and what is now our Royal Ballet, its dancers and choreographers. The old Ballets Russes companies of the 1930s and '40s – living off the Diaghilev reputation – were doomed. Ballet acquired a "national" significance. Britain had a true balletic identity.