

In Russia with the Swiss Plitsetskaya

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THE ARTS



MANOLA ASENSIO, the Swiss principal ballerina with whom our readers are already acquainted, recently returned from a month's tour of the Soviet Union, where she danced the leading roles in *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. She was invited by the Goskonzert agency together with the Swiss dancer, Hans Meister, formerly ballet director at Zurich Opera. She is the first Swiss ballerina, and one of the few Western ballerinas to have been invited by the Russians as an individual guest artist. In this interview she describes some of her experiences.

Apparently, your visit was tiring and gruelling. How was it organised?

What a tour! Indeed Hans and I had a gruelling time. I have never experienced anything like it. The programme included ten performances in five cities, which may not sound very trying. But when one takes into account all the travelling, the rehearsing, particularly of productions that differed considerably from one place to the other, it is easy to understand why the tour was so strenuous and tiring.

We travelled from Tallinn in Estonia to Vilnius in Lithuania, Kharkov in the Ukraine, Tblissi in Georgia and Novosibirsk in Siberia. Distances from one city to the other are enormous, connections often difficult with flights being delayed or cancelled, mostly because of bad weather, but for other reasons too.

We had hardly arrived in one place after a sleepless night flying or waiting for a flight than we had to get down to work to learn the production. Sometimes there was almost no time left to rehearse.

In Novosibirsk, for example, I had to use time during the interval to change my head-dress, my costume, my shoes and my make-up, then rehearse

and try the wires which were to lift me off the stage at the end of the ballet.

I was often disheartened and depressed, yet, in spite of the fatigue, of all the difficulties, in particular lack of sleep and rest, it was a most fascinating and rewarding experience.

You are the first Swiss ballerina to be invited to Russia. What sort of a welcome did you get?

Fantastic! Everywhere the audiences were friendly and enthusiastic. In Tblissi they applauded while I was doing the variations in *Giselle* Act I. At the end of the madness scene I had to make several curtain calls.

The dancers I met were very helpful and friendly. And how generous they all were. Spectators and dancers would come to my dressing-room after a performance and bring all sorts of gifts. It was so touching. A rose with a photograph, books, flowers, records, photographs taken at my performances, sweets, local specialities, chocolates – imagine, even Swiss chocolate, which must have

cost a fortune.

The tour was made a little difficult because I do not speak Russian. Of course the agency provided an interpreter who followed me everywhere, even to my dressing-room, but her English was poor and she did not understand ballet terms. The result was a number of misunderstandings which caused some frayed nerves and some minor mishaps.

Fortunately, the Russian dancers with whom I communicated in French, English or with signs, were very friendly and understanding. They helped me a lot and they showed me when I had to go on stage. Contacts with them and with other Russians were precious for me. We got on so well and they were so enthralled, especially in Novosibirsk, the city of scientists, that they would like me to go back.

Didn't they call you the Swiss Plisetskaya?

It is true and I am flattered. The dancers in Vilnius compared me to the famous ballerina Maya Plisetskaya,

when they saw me dance the *Black Swan* in *Swan Lake*.

Were you able to meet Russians in private after rehearsals and performances?

Yes, in the most natural way. Contacts with the Russians were not merely professional. They invited us at their homes and at restaurants. They took us out to the theatre, in Vilnius, to see a Goldoni play. They took us on a sight-seeing tour of Tblissi and showed us a beautiful 10th century church and magnificent 6th century cloisters.

You said that productions differed from one place to another. How did you cope?

Well, that was one of the main difficulties, but we got over the many problems with the kind help of the Russian dancers.

All the productions were first rate. The dancers were excellent. My cavaliers in *The Sleeping Beauty* in Kharkov were very handsome. In Novo-

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Some dates for your diary

**Wednesday and Thursday,
June 4 and 5:** *The Berne
String Quartet plays at the
Bath Festival. Guildhall, 6.30
pm (June 4); Assembly Rooms,
8.30pm (June 5).*

**Monday, June 9, to
Saturday, June 21:** *Manola
Asensio performs a leading
role in "Romeo and Juliet" in
Rudolf Nureyev's season with
the London Festival Ballet.
London Coliseum, 7.30pm
(also 2.30pm on Saturdays).*

**Tuesday, June 10, to
Tuesday, July 8:** *Orchestral
Interlude — "Moments in the
life of an orchestra". Photo-
graphs by Suzie E. Maeder
featuring the London
Symphony Orchestra. Royal
Festival Hall.*

Sunday, June 15: *Raphael
Sommer (cello) plays works by*

*Brahms, Britten, Pierné and
Beethoven, with Daniel Adni
(piano). Queen Elizabeth Hall,
London, 7.15pm.*

**Monday, June 23, to
Tuesday, July 1:** *Zurich Ballet
present Rudolf Nureyev's pro-
duction of "Don Quixote".
London Coliseum, 7.30pm
(also 2.30pm on Saturday).*

**Wednesday, July 2, to
Saturday, July 5:** *Zurich Ballet
presents a triple bill of works by
Balanchine in their season with
Rudolf Nureyev. London Coli-
seum, 7.30pm (also 2.30pm on
Saturday).*



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*sibirsk, the whole company
were first-class and the corps de
ballet was the finest of the
whole tour.*

*And what terrific actors those
Russians are.*

*Not only did I meet very good
dancers, but I was also
impressed by the acting of those
who held leading roles: Giselle's
mother, Rothbart the magician
in Swan Lake and many others.
In Giselle in particular, the
mother was so moving and
humane, she even wept real
tears of sadness.*

**Your first visit to Russia
was a great success. Did you
derive any benefit from it?**

*Without any doubt. Before
going to Russia I had only
danced Giselle in small theatres
in the provinces with Northern
Ballet. During my tour of Russia
I was able to work with Russian
dancers and to learn the true
Russian style. I look forward to
dancing the part in London.*

*As for the other ballets, I saw
productions that were completely
unknown to me, which was also
very interesting and revealing.*

**We, too, look forward to
seeing you in Giselle in
London. Spectators in Swit-
zerland have just had the**

**opportunity of seeing you
dance a pas de deux with
Hans Meister. The Suisse
Romande Television presented
a programme about you
in March showing you in
various ballets. You had
excellent press reviews and
we hope the Swiss will at last
become better acquainted
with a wonderful ballerina.**

*Thank you. I enjoyed doing
the film for television. It
included shots with Rudolf
Nureyev in The Sleeping
Beauty, Jonas Kage in The
Sphinx and Hans Meister in
Giselle.*

● In the Suisse Romande TV
programme Manola Asensio
appeared with Beryl Grey,
former artistic director of
London Festival Ballet. Rudolf
Nureyev was seen in a rehearsal
of The Sleeping Beauty, Hans
Meister in two pas de deux from
The Sleeping Beauty, and Jonas
Kage in a pas de deux from The
Sphinx.

Many readers of the Swiss
Observer may regret not being
able to see the foremost Swiss
ballerina appear in London with
a Swiss ballet company. But she
will be dancing a leading role in
Nureyev's production of Romeo
and Juliet for London Festival
Ballet from June 9 to 21.