

# 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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# Swiss Life



## 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 present-  
ed 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.