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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

Swiss Plisetskaya

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



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". Photographs by Suzie E. Maeder featuring the London Symphony Orchestra. Royal Festival Hall.

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



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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 Switzerland have just had the

Some dates for your diary

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 production 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 Coliseum, 7.30pm (also 2.30pm on Saturday).

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.