

NEW/ADVENTURES RE;BOURNE



SPOTLIGHT – Anjali Mehra, Irina Boronskaja in *The Red Shoes*

Tues 18 April 2017

Tell us a bit about your role in Matthew Bourne's production of *The Red Shoes*:

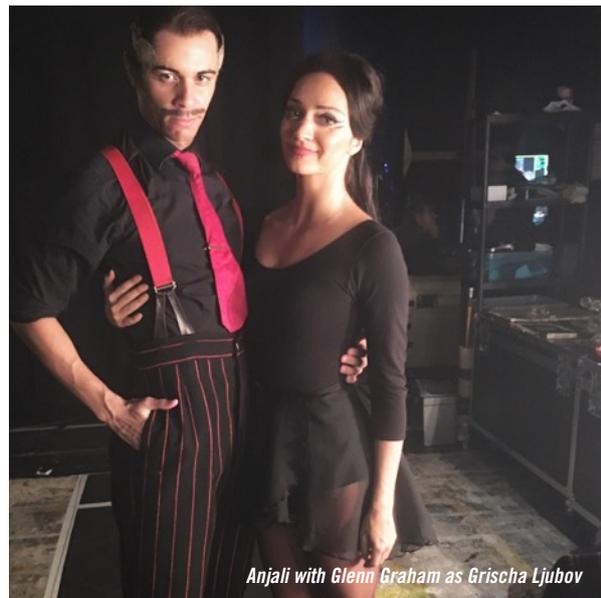
I play Irina Boronskaja, who is the prima ballerina of the Lermontov Company.

What is your favourite moment in *The Red Shoes* for your character?

I really enjoy playing both rehearsal scenes for 'Les Sylphides'. The first scene in the fur coat and walking around the stage holding my tutu really sets up the character. In the next scene, I think it is a surprise to the audience when it goes from what seems like a performance to a working rehearsal, playing my character and then switching to play my character as another character. For example, Irina playing a Sylph and then going back to Irina and how she interacts with her colleagues, especially her long-term dresser Edith, dance partner Ivan and dance master Grischa. It's a challenge to play as it's a delicate balance between being a prima ballerina with hints of comical moments but to also show that she is absolutely dedicated to the art and it is a genuine tragedy when she breaks her foot. I want the audience to care about her and know that the stakes are high. Before this, there is a moment when she notices that Lermontov has spotted Vicky and it is a real feeling of being usurped. I try to keep that thread going right through to 'difficult rehearsals'. Physically, I really enjoy dancing 'Good vs Evil' in Act 2 – it's dramatic and sharp and I love the style.

What has inspired how you created and play your character?

I read biographies of dancers from that time and watched lots of old ballets, also we were given a huge amount of research material and ideas from Matthew and were able to pick up videos and books prior and during rehearsals. I watched a lot of footage of the Ballet Russes and documentaries about the company, it was full of really interesting characters! It is really fascinating to learn about the dancers during that time, especially in the war (Gillian Lynne's book) and what they had to go through to ensure they could keep dancing. Their lives were incredibly tough, if you wanted to dance you had to sacrifice everything and their families were often uprooted. The dancers in the Ballet Russes started very young so their whole lives were growing up in the company - they knew of nothing else, it was literally what they lived for.



Anjali with Glenn Graham as Grischa Ljubov

Margot Fonteyn was also an inspiration, her stories about how they were always impeccably turned out wherever they went is so far from our generation now. The other interesting thing was how dancers often specialised in different styles, rather than the technique that dancers have nowadays. Dancers were celebrated by their individual styles, for example, one would be known for their quick and light footwork and others would be famous for their ability to play dramatic roles. If you see footage of ballerinas playing the Dying Swan, for example, the feel of the wings and sorrow is exquisite over and above the feet, legs, turn out etc. I found that interesting and moving. I also believe that they felt a duty to present themselves as 'stars' at all times, so it wasn't necessarily that they were 'divas' in the modern sense of the word, I think it was just the way they had to be if they were high profile in the dance company/dance world. That was an interesting thing to explore; the idea of embodying style and character for the different ballets/dances in *The Red Shoes* and the idea that Irina embodies a 'star' as opposed to just 'putting it on'.

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If you've been in a New Adventures show other than The Red Shoes, how does this new work differ in terms of what may have been asked from you thematically?

Oh gosh, what a question! I have been lucky enough to play a few leading roles, my first job leaving Central School of Ballet in 1999 was Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* and I played quite a few roles (Italian, Spanish, German princesses and Moth Maiden) so I am very grateful that there are still roles after all this time that I can play! Later, I played Sugar in *Nutcracker!* who starts as a spoilt child and then turns into a narcissistic diva - quite malevolent but with SO much comedy... lots of fun to play!

I have also played Glenda in *Play Without Words* who is a conflicted character. She feels the need to present an outer image of perfection but has a sleeping tiger in her, this is quite like the Queen in *Swan Lake*. Playing the Queen was a huge highlight because of how dramatic her journey is from start to finish, you feel quite broken at the end! Differing from those roles is the Girlfriend in *Swan Lake* which again was fantastic to play, hearing the audiences' laughter is very satisfying! She has a heart of gold but is a fish out of water and sacrifices everything for integrity.

I feel like all these roles are different and challenging and I feel extremely lucky to have been cast in them all. With Irina, she must exude a sense of allure, self-confidence, self-possession, intensity and control. She is what she is through sheer passion, hard work and determination but underneath it all, there exists the same insecurity that many women (and men) feel - never really knowing when her time will be up, when she'll lose her sparkle and a younger model will take her place.

How do you reflect on your performance after the show other than receiving notes from other company members/resident director etc.

I literally go through my WHOLE show over and over in my head while I lie in bed after every show. It is really a bit obsessive and stops me from sleeping! Sometimes it's just to do with steps and how I can dance them better, or present the style better or I can figure out some better partnering in a moment that didn't work. But also, the most fun parts are discovering moments where you can share something with another character onstage, although sometimes the opportunities take a while to present themselves. For example, my character knocks into another character and that is why she trips and breaks her foot. She approaches me in the 'Difficult Rehearsal' scene and I am not quite ready to forgive her and I kept thinking, 'we have to make up at some point' and I finally found a moment in the 'Company Party' where we could do it and it felt great to tie up that story!

Personally, I like to let each day/my mood affect my character, and who I am playing against. Each partner that you interact with is so different so you must be ready to improvise. If I haven't partnered someone for a while, I think about moments that I should remember for the next time so it's not always a surprise. It really is the best thing about performing for me; keeping the show alive, the dialogue going with your colleagues and creating a whole and real person/story/situation within our imaginary world. What is also important is to not get too caught up in your own idea if it isn't working. We have a great team in addition to Matthew, giving notes and letting us know what reads better dramatically and what looks better dancing wise, so we can constantly enhance and improve and make sure we are reaching the audience. After all, it is for them!



Anjali in costume backstage

You can follow Anjali on Twitter (@AnjaliMehra_H) and Instagram (@anjalimehra) for a further insight into her world.