



Nina
Anania



shvili

Interview by MALCOLM ROCK

Nina Ananiashvili as Kitri in *Don Quixote*. Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

In 2004 Ananiashvili, a native of the former soviet region that borders Russia and Turkey, was in New York performing with American Ballet Theatre when she received a request for an immediate audience with recently elected Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. Not one to let down her fans, Ananiashvili said she could only meet the new head of state when her American performances were over. Two months later, therefore, the ballerina set off to see the president in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. His ensuing request left Ananiashvili speechless.

“I was shocked,” recalls Ananiashvili, “What he asked me was totally unexpected.”

Keen to put his country's years of civil war behind it, Saakashvili had offered Ananiashvili the keys to the chocolate factory: a fully-staffed ballet company and school that he wanted her to turn into the cultural cornerstone of his new republic.

“He said, ‘I don't know what we need to do, but we need you here and we need you now. I know you're busy, but what can we do to keep you here with us?’”

It was the biggest decision of Ananiashvili's life and she was expected to make it on the spot: “I was not sure I wanted to give up the freedom of life as a travelling dancer – everything would



have to change – and being a good ballerina does not mean being a good director. But how could I say no?”

And so Ananiashvili, aged 41 at the time, said “yes” and was the very next day introduced by the president himself to more than a hundred wide-eyed dancers and administrators of the State Ballet of Georgia as their new artistic director.

Overnight, in tights and a tutu, Ananiashvili became a national hero of the arts. An early government cash injection got things off to a quick start, but the novice director's credentials – first as a Bolshoi principal and then an internationally in-demand prima ballerina – were not enough to protect her decision-making from coming under scrutiny.

“My staff thought I was crazy programming five completely new ballets with new costumes and decorations for the very first season. They said it couldn't be done, but I said it had to be done or it would be too late. I told them, ‘I don't want to hear what we can't do or don't have because we have everything now and we are going to make this happen.’”

Gradually her objectors fell in line as they observed an exponential improvement in the corps de ballet. Ananiashvili's bold vision proved a success, not only in its first season, but throughout subsequent seasons. Four years on and the company has built a solid repertoire of 30 ballets, including full-length productions of *Giselle*, *Don Quixote* and *Swan Lake* as well as works by Jiří Kylián, Frederick Ashton, Stanton Welch and George Balanchine, whose *Chaconne* is part of this year's Edinburgh International Arts Festival.

“*Chaconne* was the 100th role I danced,” says Ananiashvili, who will dance the role again during the Festival. “Edinburgh is very important for the company because it is the first time it will be seen in Europe.”

Chaconne is complemented in a mixed bill by another Balanchine ballet, *Duo Concertant*, as well as *Bizet Variations*, which is choreographed by Ananiashvili's former Bolshoi partner Alexei Ratmansky. *Sagalobeli*, a new work set to traditional Georgian music by San Francisco-based choreographer Yuri Possokhov, completes the programme (“I wanted to use a choreographer without a native ear who would hear this Georgian folk music differently”).

Edinburgh will also host the company's *Giselle* with Ananiashvili dancing the title role, which she describes as the “most romantic” in the balletic canon.

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It seems critics are not bored either. Only last year Alastair Macauley of the New York Times praised Ananiashvili's “marvellously fresh” *Giselle*. He wrote: “I kept having to remind myself that it had been 21 years since I saw her dance her first Western performance of the role in Paris with the Bolshoi ... she is just as fresh now.” Flattered by the comment, Ananiashvili reveals that her secret is to “always dance like maybe it's my last”.

“When I dance *Giselle* today I feel totally different from how I did 20 years ago. I understand more and have more experiences inside me. I have a big jump, a light jump, and people like it. But I always hear

my teacher (Natalia Zolotova) in my ear telling me that if I don't make it correctly, if I don't make it natural and true, I will always be Myrthe and not *Giselle*.”

Last month Ananiashvili retired her *Don Quixote* with final performances in New York and Georgia. The decision was due, in part, to her commitments with the SBG. Ironically, however, she will be obliged to remain on the stage a while longer for the sake of the company and its profile.

“I'm still jumping and I want people to remember me that way, but I can't do it forever. What is difficult is that I still need to dance more to help the profile of the company. These days everybody's problem is my problem; everything comes to me. Part of my job is to sell tickets and one way I can do this is by dancing.”

There is a sense of satisfaction to Ananiashvili's descriptions of the SBG and its work, but her outward enthusiasm is at times betrayed by an air of one overwhelmed by expectation and a melancholy that comes from having partially sacrificed the freedom afforded a roaming and adored international ballet star.

“ABT became like a second home company and I really like New York and I think New York likes me. Reactions are more open in the US whereas Europe and Russia are more



Nina Anaiashvili and Angel Corella in *Giselle* - ABT May 2008. Photo: Mira

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like ‘show us what you can do and we'll see’. Except in Denmark where they start banging the floor with their feet. I have many friends at the Royal Danish Ballet. I will miss all this when it's gone completely.”

Today Ananiashvili has two dependents: a budding ballet company and a two-year-old baby, Elena, whom she is trying her best to dissuade from a career in dance.

“She comes to the theatre because she doesn't want to stay at home and she happily watches three hours of ballet. She put on pointe shoes the other day and I said to her, ‘please don't put on pointe shoes, I would prefer you were a singer’.”