Mariinsky Ballet 50th Anniversary Season Royal Opera House Covent Gardens

**Homage to Fokine Chopiniana – The Firebird – Schéhérazade** (1931 version)

**Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre** Conductor: Boris Gruzin

Ballet in Russia dates back to 1738 with the founding of a dancing school in St. Petersburg by the French dancing master Jean-Baptiste Landé. The first students of the dance school were children of the palace servants. The school has survived over 250 years of political and economic change and remains central to the history of Russian ballet. The dawning of the twentieth century and with political revolution in the air, innovation and change appeared from the Petersburg ballet house. This change could be seen in the theories of Mikhail Fokine and the efforts of Sergei Diaghilev. They with their contemporaries demonstrated the newest ideas in choreography and production. The Ballet Russes conquered the West in 1909 bringing about a resurgence of ballet for European audiences as dancers from the school demonstrated a new wave of dance genius.

There continued to be radical changes happening inside the Petersburg ballet a new society was emerging from the revolutions of 1917. Petersburg became Leningrad and the Mariinsky Theatre became the Academic Theatre, later renamed the Kirov Theatre in 1935 after the assassinated politician. In the political age which followed the ending of the Communist rule, the Kirov Ballet reverted to its original title, the Ballet of the Mariinsky Theatre.

This visit a special occasion for many Brits marks the 50th anniversary of the first performance in the West. In 1961 the company then known as the Leningrad State Kirov Ballet, made its debut performance at the Paris Opéra House. The performance was overshadowed by the very public defection of Rudolf Nureyev to the West. Nureyev left the troupe at Orly Airport as it prepared to fly to London.

Once in London for a season at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden the troupe was revered for its exceptional classical style, the integrity of its productions, and the gracious and expressive dancing. London fell in love with the Kirov Ballet troupe and after fifty years that love is as passionate now as it was then. This 2011 season marks the Golden Jubliee of that momentous encounter and the acknowledgement of Victor Hochhauser who organised the first appearance and still presents what is now the Mariinsky Ballet today.

**Homage to Fokine** is a collection of three ballets. It is a celebration of Mikhail Fokine’s contributions to this art. He brought about a new expressivity in movement that told its story through action of the dance rather than the gestures of conventional mime. The choreography spoke, and a new world was created through the collaboration of the music and the dance design.

The first ballet **Chopinana**, a set of five dances set to music by **Frédéric Chopin**. This supreme example of abstract ballet is set in a forest glade at night, Svetlana Ivanova dances the eleventh waltz like any great ballerina never faltering with each step. Maxim Zyuzin follows with a Mazurka his grace and style second to none. Another Mazurka follows danced by Oksana Skoryk certainly the female counterpart to Zyuzin. Next is Dria Kuznetsova dancing a Prelude with all the grace and beauty sensitively shaping the small rhythmic and melodic motifs into elegant movement. Finally the Seventh Waltz danced in harmony by Skoryk and Zyuzin.

A twenty minute break ensued then we returned to our seats to be wowed by the aural, visual and artistic mastery in the presentation of an adaptation of two Russian fairy tales, **The Firebird** and **Kostchei the Immortal**. The music composed by Ivor Stravinsky, the dance choreographed by Mikhail Fokine premiered at the Paris Opéra on 25 June 1910. The stunning success of this ballet **The Firebird** catapulted **Stravinsky** into the front rank of contemporary composers. The cast; The Firebird : Anastasia Pitushkova, Ivan-Tsarevich: Yuri Smekalov, The Beatuiful Tsarevna: Viktoria Brileva, Kostchei the Immortal: Vladimir Ponomarev once again brilliantly danced to an ideal symbiosis between décor, choreography and music.

The final ballet, Schéhérazade, is based on one of the tales from the Arabian Nights. The thousand and one stories told by the Sultan’s wife to postpone her husband’s practice of executing each of his new brides the morning after their wedding if performed by; Sultan Shakhriar: Soslan Kulaev, Zobeide: Ekaterina Kondaurove, The Golden Slave: Igor Kolb, Shah Zemen: Karen Ioanissiyan, The Chief Eunuch: Stanislav Burov, The Odalisques: Evgenia Dolmatova, Yulia Stepanova, Alisa Sodoleva. An Arabian tale equal to the Russian Firebird the aesthetic brilliance of this ballet is equalled.

I would not consider myself a balletomane but the Mariinsky ballet troupe danced with uncanny precision, their uniformity absolute. They became a multiple vision of the ballet dancer at the story’s heart. As the season continues there will be numerous opportunities for the viewing public to admire the perfection of Russian classical dance and experience a sensual aural fest with the best from early 20th century composers. Convent Garden one of the most prestigious Opera Houses in Europe is also one of the most accessible to the general public hosting this special event in ardent splendour.



