



SHALL WE DANCE?

An acid attack on the artistic director of the controversial Bolshoi Ballet has shocked but not distracted its principal dancers before its Brisbane visit, writes **Vanessa Keys**

AT 9.30pm on January 17, Yekaterina Shipulina, a principal dancer with the Bolshoi Ballet, said goodnight to her husband and went to bed.

It was an unusually early bedtime for the dancer but Shipulina was exhausted from her unrelenting performance schedule and wanted to be fresh for her customary 11am class in the morning.

It wasn't her alarm that roused her the next day at 7am but a journalist demanding Shipulina's opinion on why the artistic director of the Bolshoi, Sergei Filin, had been attacked outside his Moscow home in the dead of night by a masked man brandishing a glass of sulfuric acid.

Shipulina was speechless. She hadn't turned on the news or checked the internet and the very idea that someone would act so violently towards Filin seemed inconceivable.

"The most unpleasant thing was that immediately after Filin was attacked, the journalists pounced on us dancers, asking if we knew who did it, and if we thought a dancer was behind the attack," says Shipulina, shielding her eyes from the sun streaming through the Bolshoi Theatre's atrium windows, then sighs.

"We said, 'Ask the professional investigators, that's their job'. We didn't make an agreement between ourselves or anything, but all us

dancers didn't talk to the press after Filin was attacked. It was like an outburst of protest, I guess."

This is Moscow during one of those impossibly sunny winter weeks that deceives visitors into believing it's warmer than the minus 12C outside.

Sun leaks through the windows that frame the Bolshoi Theatre's impressive atrium, bathing the lean, leggy Shipulina in golden light.

It's been a little over six weeks since the company was rocked by the biggest scandal in its muddy history and it would be expected for the dancers and management to shy away from talking about the attack. But quite the opposite happens.

The dancers are as happy to talk about the attack as they are their pending Brisbane tour, synchronously excoriating the masked assailant while shrugging away any suggestion that Filin's attack has left the company in mourning.

"It's a cruel world and, of course, some management are liked more than the others. It's normal," principal dancer Ruslan Skvortsov says.

"Of course, there are people who are not very happy but that's always been and will be the case. Our schedule is so tight that we cannot be distracted, otherwise the work will

stop."

Skvortsov and Shipulina are two of eight principals who will dance the lead roles in *Le Corsaire* and *The Bright Stream* – two ballets new to Australian audiences – in Brisbane from later this month.

The last time the duo was Down Under was in 2000 to promote the Bolshoi's newly announced Australasian Bolshoi Ballet Academy. The school never made it to fruition yet both Skvortsov and Shipulina have fond memories.

Skvortsov is looking forward to visiting a friend he hasn't seen in 20 years, while Shipulina remembers "everything being very bright, lots of colour, lovely people".

While Filin recuperates in a German hospital – doctors remain hopeful he will recover useful vision – speculation surrounding the motive of the attack continues to swirl.

Every day, it seems, another melodramatic outburst by a Bolshoi dancer pops up in the press. From being labelled a "huge brothel" by former prima dancer Anastasia Volochkova to being sued by Russian TV star and principal dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze, the Bolshoi's public slandering seems at odds to the almost-sedate atmosphere witnessed during this visit to the theatre.

The dancers are adamant that one





SEE IT
BOLSHOI BALLET
SEASON: Performed at QPAC's Lyric Theatre will be *Le Corsaire*, May 30-31 and June 1,2,4 and 5; and *The Bright Stream*, June 7-9
COST: From \$69 to \$274
BOOK: qpac.com.au
MORE: qpac.com.au/Bolshoi

of their own could not have carried out the attack, despite the fact Bolshoi soloist Pavel Dmitrichenko and two alleged accomplices are currently awaiting trial for the crime.

Interim Bolshoi director Galina Stepanenko is, not surprisingly, aghast at the thought that a dancer could be behind the attack.

"Dancers by nature are people who

create new things," she says. "I would think that this kind of crime is done by a different kind of character, someone who holds on to all their anger. I would think all dancers have such emotional explosions on the stage that they would not be capable of crime like this."

Skvortsov and Shipulina sing the same tune.

"I don't believe that any of the dancers here could be capable of doing something so horrible," Shipulina says. "It makes me very upset that people think that."

Both say they try to distance themselves from company politics.

"Theatre is not just one person, it's a big huge mechanism," Skvortsov says.

"Audiences don't just want to see dance, they want to enjoy themselves. We shouldn't show them that something bad has happened."





Bravura down under

RETURNING to Australia for the first time in almost two decades, the Bolshoi Ballet brings to Brisbane two of the company's most acclaimed works, *Le Corsaire* and *The Bright Stream*.

Neither has been performed in Australia. Bolshoi interim director Galina Stepanenko promises a wild ride: "*Le Corsaire* (pictured) is pure spectacle and *Bright Stream* is very funny. I think Australian audiences will be delighted to see them."

First performed at the Bolshoi in 1856 and revived in 2007 by Yuri Burlaka and Alexei Ratmansky, *Le Corsaire* (the Pirate) epitomises high-octane melodrama. With a plot described by *The New York Times* as "a peg on which to hang dances, tunes, scenery and costumes", this swashbuckling ballet boasts stabbings, gun fights, a shipwreck, slave auction and an abduction.

"It is traditional and very

spectacular," says Bolshoi dancer Yekaterina Shipulina, one of the principal ballerinas to perform the lead role of Medora, a harem girl who falls in love with dashing pirate Conrad.

It's one of the most technically difficult female roles of all time. In the ballet's first act Shipulina doesn't leave the stage once.

"It is very challenging, very tiring," she says. "But that's half the fun." While not as extravagant as *Le Corsaire*, *The Bright Stream* is a deliciously decadent comedic romp that was banned by Stalin in the '30s because he thought it was encoded with subversive messages about the Soviet government.

Thankfully, it was revived by star choreographer Alexei Ratmansky in 2003 and injected with irony, humour and a show-stopping scene with a cross-dressing spoof of classical ballet.