

Sylvie bids adieu holding her head (and leg) high

Sylvie Guillem retires from the stage at fifty years of age. Her swan song is a “contemporary signature show” (Forsythe, Ek, Khan, Maliphant) that debuted in March at Modena’s Teatro Comunale (Italy) and is currently touring – ports of call include the Sadler’s Wells in London, the “Nuits de Fourvière” in Lyon and, last stop (December) Tokyo. It has been said of Guillem that she is beautiful and perfect, yet cold; certainly she is haughty, intolerant and nonconformist, at least judging from her own words – words that she has dispensed sparingly in interview, though not always. Valeria Crippa has been interviewing her for twenty years and is able to portray her through those words

A farewell tour, a ‘last dance’ is a strange rite. The worldwide public funeral of an outstanding career. A one-off exclusive rite, celebrated in a specific theatre, in a specific town, for the benefit of spectators thrilled by the gripping emotions aroused by the *étoile*’s final curtain. Forever farewell. Yet it is an event that can be virtually replicated endlessly, on demand, in another part of the world, before a different, albeit equally moved audience, thrilled to think that their favourite star is bidding farewell to them and them alone. Farewell all over again.

All over the world there is a tradition for the funeral service of a brilliant career on pointes: generally the exiting star will regale the public with his/her bravura pieces. If the star is a lady, she is usually partnered by a handsome dancer, there will be value-added scenography and an adornment company (possibly) in tears.

Sylvie Guillem and Rudolf Nureyev in the 1980s (ph. Eurofotocine)

The more one shines at the end of one’s career, the more one will continue to glow in the memories of those who were there. That is usually the feature of a farewell tour – but not of Sylvie Guillem’s, the French ballerina having chosen the exact opposite for her farewell tour. The world début took place on 30 March at the Teatro Comunale in Modena, an understated and ballet-loving Italian town. No pomp and circumstance, Mademoiselle Guillem opted for a shabby-chic format: great choreographers (Forsythe, Ek), minimalist sets and contemporary works by the trendiest dance makers of the moment (Khan, Maliphant).

Snobbery? But of course. However... Let us go back to 1999 and to issue No.45 of *BALLET2000*: “Sylvie Guillem, the Icy Divine” was the title of an blistering article written by the doyenne of Italian critics, Vittoria Ottolenghi (a great friend of Nureyev’s) who confessed without reserve the irritation, “unreasonable lack of appreciation, if not animosity” that she felt vis-à-vis the Parisian star right from the days of her early appearance at the Varna Competition: “regal, very beautiful, and detached”. Certainly these are appropriate adjectives for an artist who measured her stage career in units of rigour and perfectionism, who was generously blessed by nature with stunning and refined beauty – all gifts which bewitched Rudolf Nureyev and Maurice Béjart (who said about her “she has a unique talent and a multifaceted personality, clear and elusive, like everything that goes beyond the rules and reaches that mysterious place from where great poets set sail on their ‘Drunken Boat’) in her early days, and William Forsythe and Bob Wilson later on.

Audiences and critics have either venerated or detested Sylvie Guillem. There were even those who rejoiced for her quite unique slip-up in *The Sleeping Beauty* with The Royal Ballet – profusely viewed on Youtube and ballyhooed as “Sylvie Guillem is human!” – an attempt to use that flaw to make this untoward dancer seem more accessible, her disposition having always been a challenge within an institutional company, whether the Paris Opéra Ballet or





*Sylvie Guillem: "Bye",
c. M. Ek (ph. L. Leslie-Spinks)*



same goes for that stupid and superficial Gamzatti. Other roles I don't like? La Sylphide, a total idiot, I could never dance her. I save only Giselle, a character who has dignity and achieves inner growth through suffering."

Her choreographic version of *Giselle*, created for the Finnish National Ballet, was performed at La Scala in 2001: "All too often, when I was dancing amidst the courtiers in the original version, I used to feel like an ugly duckling surrounded by decked out and unreal people. My *Giselle* is alive and real, she isn't a puppet." Ten years later, in 2011, her rendering of MacMillan's *Manon* was a masterpiece of intelligent theatrics, preceded by a fierce row with the Milanese theatre which later closed its doors on her: "They got the revamping wrong, those in charge don't respect the artists' requisites," she blurted out.

No matter: in 2012 the Venice Biennale awarded her the Lifetime Achievement Golden Lion "for having re-drawn the figure of the ballerina, defying the laws of physics." The account of her career which she herself gave during an interview on that occasion was far less highfalutin: "I could have ended up like a cork floating on water at the mercy of the currents," she confessed, "instead I preferred to take the steering wheel of my life into my own hands and go for the open sea. When Nureyev promoted me to *étoile* at the Paris Opéra I was only 19; for many dancers that would have been a goal, but not so for me. Nureyev was intransigent, I learnt a lot from him. Too much security and comfort is an enemy to art. It's far better to walk constantly on the razor's edge. I rely on the support of Sadler's Wells in London to organise my activity. But I'm not into marketing and I don't dance for the purpose of being recognised on the street. One must dance for the sake of it."

She has been coherent right up to her retirement which was announced a few months before the farewell tour kicked off from Modena: "I can't go any higher than this, so I might as well stop and say goodbye to dancing. It was a difficult decision, but I prefer to be the one to take it freely, before my body begins to play up. I don't want the public to notice before I do. It's better to make a clean cut and have a clean wound rather than pain that eats away like poison. This way it will be easier to heal." Straight-talk for a cold and perfect princess, is it not?

Valeria Crippa

Below, some self-portraits for the magazine "Vogue" (2000)

Sylvie Guillem in her "Giselle" in London in 2001 with La Scala Ballet (ph. J. Moatti)

The Royal Ballet.

My personal impression of Sylvie Guillem, built up in years of interviews for *Il Corriere della Sera*, is not of an icy and haughty diva, but of a creature from another planet, forward-looking and intolerant of the system. Difficult, but primarily towards herself with her innate need to move continually forward, never one of the pack but far better off on her own. The theme of women's emancipation surfaced clearly in a conversation we had in 1999 at the Grand Hotel et de Milan (the Milanese hotel where Giuseppe Verdi died): amidst the stuccos and mirrors Guillem emerged looking like Lara Croft in shorts, boots and a long Titian red plait, smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes: "Bayadère? She's nothing but a naive doll, with neither psychological depth nor dramatic logic", she declared unhesitatingly on the eve of her début in the Makarova version of the ballet at La Scala: "The

