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DANCE

A Star Ballet Couple Take a Contemporary Turn

By ROSLYN SULCAS NOV. 9, 2016



Sergei Polunin and Natalia Osipova in Arthur Pita's "Run Mary Run." Bill Cooper

LONDON — Natalia Osipova and Sergei Polunin are ballet's wunder-couple. She is the former Bolshoi ballerina of the steel-sprung jump and artless impetuosity who has been a principal guest artist with American Ballet Theater, and who surprised the dance world by decamping, first to the Mikhailovsky Ballet in 2011, then to the Royal Ballet here. He is the Ukrainian-born, wildly gifted former Royal Ballet dancer who became a principal at 19, then caused a sensation by walking out in 2012 amid mutual allegations of ill treatment. The British press ate up the mildly salacious rumors of drug abuse, tattoos and high living that ensued, and Mr. Polunin — about whom a [documentary film](#) has recently been made — became famous beyond the dance world, hitting a viral streak (close to 17 million views to date) on [YouTube](#) in a

solo filmed by David LaChapelle.

Ms. Osipova, 30, and Mr. Polunin, 26, who will appear together in "Natalia Osipova and Artists" at [New York City Center](#), Thursday through Saturday, never crossed paths at the Royal Ballet. But they met two years ago when Ms. Osipova was looking for a partner for a guest appearance at La Scala. To the delight of the ballet world, they fell in love and have been an offstage pair ever since.

Onstage they have had little chance to dance together, since Mr. Polunin, who has been little seen in the United States, hasn't yet been welcomed back at the Royal Ballet. But in June this year, Ms. Osipova followed in the footsteps of older ballerinas like Sylvie Guillem and Diana Vishneva by commissioning — under the auspices of Sadler's Wells — a [program](#) of works, by Russell Maliphant and Arthur Pita, that pair the couple. (Ms. Osipova also dances with James O'Hara and Jason Kittelberger in Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's "Qutb.")

Just before they left for New York, Ms. Osipova (known to her friends as Natasha) and Mr. Polunin spoke in a restaurant near their London home about the challenges and rewards of performing contemporary work, and about their future plans. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Natalia, you're still at your peak as a classical dancer, why did you decide to do this program of contemporary dance now?

NATALIA OSIPOVA I think contemporary dance needs the kind of physicality I have now; it's tough on the body, and I think by 35 or so, it might be late for me. But the main thing is I really want to find my choreographer and create something special and substantial with that person.

What are the challenges involved in working with such different physical styles?

SERGEI POLUNIN I found it hard. When I worked with Russell [Maliphant] for the documentary, it was my first contemporary work, and a huge thing for me. I was very biased; I felt, I'm a classical dancer, modern is not my thing. At the beginning, I had no idea how to do even the most basic things he wanted.

OSIPOVA What's difficult for me is that I'm an emotional person, and I want a reason for moving. In Russell and Larbi's work it is pure dance, and it's also not about giving everything at every moment. In ballet, you are always projecting forward, but here, sometimes you have to hold back.

Has working in these idioms changed you as dancers?

POLUNIN I still think that contemporary dance isn't really my thing, but through working with Natasha on this, I've learned about a whole other world. I saw nothing but ballet growing up. I was very ignorant. I still am actually, unlike Natasha, who knows everything! I'm working on my own program now [Project Polunin], and starting to learn a bit more.

OSIPOVA When we first started performing this program, I was dancing "Giselle" in Munich, and I actually felt much more freedom within the classical. I was using my arms, my body a little differently, bringing more detail to everything. I think the more you enrich your body language, the more you can speak as an artist.

You seem to have quite different dance tastes.

OSIPOVA Completely! But it's boring if you think the same way all the time.

POLUNIN Natasha works very hard before the performance to be more free onstage. I am more relaxed before so that I am focused onstage. It's more dangerous, things can go wrong, but it makes me concentrate.

What are your plans?

POLUNIN I would love to integrate proper management, proper representation of dancers into Project Polunin. That doesn't exist in the ballet world. Why can't dancers travel, do talk shows, earn decent money? Their work is just as amazing as footballers or actors. Opera singers go everywhere, but when a dancer wants to move around, the companies behave like you are betraying them.

OSIPOVA You have to understand that this profession is very hard and you sacrifice your life to do it. For us, it's O.K., we have some kind of fame. But you look at the ballet girls in the corps; they are beautiful and talented, and no one cares about them. And they are some of the best dancers in the world.