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London to Be Summer Center of Russian Ballet

By Des Brown

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The Bolshoi's Anna Tikhomirova and Artem Ovcharenko, who will be appearing in "Swan Lake." **Vadim Shultz**

Never in its history will the Bolshoi arrive for a London season under such a heavy cloud of controversy. Anatoly Iksanov was removed as the head of the ballet after 13 years — his contract still had a year to run — and replaced by Vladimir Urin at the beginning of last week, while artistic director Sergei Filin was horribly attacked back in January, when a jar of sulfuric acid was thrown into Filin's face.

Iksanov's departure was announced amid accusations of mismanaging the company's $1 billion renovation, while the headline-hitting acid attack was allegedly under the instruction of a former company member, Pavel Dmitrichenko, who has since been arrested. Nothing in the ballet's 237 year history can compare with this past year's roller coaster, and Russia's stages will be bidding a restful farewell until September 5.

"The Bolshoi's Tipping Pointe" was the headline in a Daily Telegraph magazine article on the company on July 8. However, in anticipation of the company's arrival, it concluded: "To judge by Swan Lake, we have a treat in store when the Bolshoi reaches us later this month."

The curtain will go up on July 29 at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden — home of Britain's Royal Ballet — with the timeless Tchaikovsky's favorite. The Bolshoi are performing until August 17 with productions of La Bayadere, The Sleeping Beauty, Jewels — Emeralds, Rubies and Diamonds, and The Flames of Paris, featuring Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev.

The three week season is being billed as the 50th anniversary since the company first danced on the London stage at Covent Garden.

Except it isn't. It is their 50th season under the banner of Victor Hockhauser. In the postwar era, the Bolshoi first danced at the Royal Opera House in October 1956, not July 1963, when they also danced Swan Lake.

That first London season was a seminal moment in the era of the Cold War. Prime Minister Anthony Eden attended the first performance on October 3, 1956.

The very name still raises hairs on the back of the necks of all us foreign ballet lovers. Any visit to Covent Garden is always a major cultural event, and this is the Bolshoi's first visit since 2010.

But this is not the only Russian ballet to figure prominently in the British cultural scene this summer. The Russian Seasons of the 21st Century (Les Saisons Russes du XX1e Siecle) will be joining the Bolshoi in London between July 16 and 20th at the English National Opera's home, the London Coliseum.

Making their highly anticipated return to the Coliseum — where they first performed in 2011 — Les Saisons Russes will perform three programs, a total of six ballets, including the London premiere of Cleopatre; Ida Rubinstein, choreographed by Patrick de Bana; and five of Mikhail Fokine's greatest works: Le Spectre de la Rose, Scheherazade, Chopiniana, Polovtsian Dances and The Firebird.

Andris Liepa, former Bolshoi and Mariinsky ballet star and artistic director of Les Saisons Russes, has put together a star cast of performers for the London season with stars from the Bolshoi, Kremlin, Mariinsky and Stanislavsky ballets.

Such legends as Diaghilev, Fokine and Nijinsky were ignored in Russia after they chose to stay in the West following the 1917 Revolution. Liepa has spent a significant portion of his career reviving the Russian Seasons ballets in their original form, together with the Kremlin Ballet troupe and other international ballet stars.

"After the Revolution," said Liepa, "virtually all the works went to the West. Very few remained and those who did couldn't officially say they were the heirs to artists such as Mikhail Fokine."

The opportunity to place the talents of the Russian artists back on stage was a wonderful opportunity for Liepa.

"The idea of bringing these artists and wonderful works back to life, and particularly back to Russia where they began, started on my birthday; I decided to visit Diaghilev's grave on the island of San Michele near Venice. It was deserted.

I saw the shoes dancers leave on his grave and I felt I had to give something too, so I danced my father's version of Diaghilev's Le Spectre de la Rose," he said, remembering a unique opportunity he had to explore further possibilities back in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Only in 1992, thanks to the Lunacharsky Library [now the St. Petersburg State Theater Library] was I able to see the things that Fokine had had sent to Leningrad. They hadn't been seen by anyone since 1957. When Perestroika happened, I was the first person allowed to see these unique things," he said.

The ENO will be continuing the theme with a tribute to Rudolf Nureyev, with performances on July 25, 26 and 27 of three pieces of significance during his lifetime and career: The tribute marks the 20th anniversary of Nureyev's death.

This summer, overall, it seems, marks a rare occasion when London could be the best place to view the crème de la crème of Russian ballet.

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