



Pointe of view

Wednesday, June 19, 2002

So much effort goes into the creation of the too, too perfect grace of the Royal Ballet. Ashley Hay reports from backstage.

Ballet, from a distance, is a thing of featherlight grace. It strives for elegant precision, fragile costumes, an exaggerated control of movement, gesture and expression.

The Royal Ballet, for lots of people, is The Ballet. It has Darcey Bussell. It has Sylvie Guillem. Its Prima Ballerina Assoluta is Dame Margot Fonteyn. And through June and July, its Australian director Ross Stretton has packed huge wicker hampers and cardboard boxes, crate after crate of scenery, bundles of shoes and a covey of dancers, and brought it all from London.

These dancers strain for a perfection that seems sometimes to have nothing to do with the human form. Their every movement is stylised - even greeting each other in a class. They have a consciousness about body that makes everyone else seem lumpy and awkward. The men stretch and tighten muscles you've never seen before. The women spin and their chests are all rib.

"Please don't photograph my feet," the tiny Romanian dancer Alina Cojocaru asks, getting ready to rehearse her debut in *Swan Lake*. "I hate it when people look at my feet and think, oh, the poor dancer." She is sewing those feet into tights, taping her toes, working her heels into pink satin slippers, tying their ribbons tight so they press into her flesh. They are very worked feet. But feet are what it's all about: crop the feet off a picture of a ballerina dancing and you will have an unhappy ballerina. Their feet are their face, someone mutters like it's a mantra.

The hallways inside Sydney's Capitol Theatre are full of a strange banging, the sound of pointe shoes being bashed against brick walls - softening them for those hard-worked feet to wear, but keeping them brittle enough so those feet can balance impossibly on the tip of a toe. Tiny women in skirts of slivered chiffon, their headdresses making them all look the same, rub their feet and their shoes in trays of rosin, strapping their slippers tight, practising rises and falls and turns.



On stage, Bussell - who opened *Swan Lake's* Sydney season - waits to move. "Darcey, are you dancing?" someone calls, and she nods. "With music?" And she shakes. Around the edges of the set, extras jostle and talk. The two girls chosen to be that night's "Young Girls" - Sophia Leone from Sydney's Ryde and Renee Wright from Blaxland in the Blue Mountains - finish their first rehearsal. Lights go up and down. Props move back and forward. And in the middle of this, Darcey



Perfection: Alina Cojocaru and Johan Kobborg in rehearsal for Swan Lake

KYLIE MELINDA SMITH

Bussell begins to dance.

She's wearing nothing in particular, just discordant layers of knitting and polar fleece - the messy opposite of anything an audience will see. But when she begins to dance, the movement seems intrinsic to her, not something she ever needed to learn or remember. She's standing flat on the floor

then she rises onto the pointe of one toe: it looks easy. She stops, breaks her own flow, tries something again and again, until she's happy, and still the movement is compelling; it belongs to her.

Then she's gone and Alina Cojocaru is onstage, frocked up in this tutu that little girls dream of inheriting. The phalanx of swans and cygnets come on, their shoulders lined up like an infinite reflection bouncing between two mirrors. But up close to this dancing, you hear the slap of feet, the sharp turn of skirts, and the pant of the swans as they reach the end of each portion of their dance. They move, they glide, and they pause in tableaux with their hands shaking from being held stiff and their shoulders rising and falling with stretched breathing.

There is nothing effortless about this. A weight of discipline underpins the moments of careful grace that ballet audiences crave. The weight of all of this creates the thin delicacy of what goes onto the stage.

- *The Royal Ballet will perform in Sydney (to June 23) and Melbourne (June 27-July 7).*