

MEDIA

Force of Nature Natalia

ROBERT PENMAN reviews the latest dance documentary at the Curzon

Force of Nature *Natalia* is the title of a new film about Natalia Osipova by British award-winning documentary filmmaker Gerry Fox, and pretty much a statement of fact, neatly summing up the career of its subject. It joins a spate of recent films about dancers - Nureyev (*White Crow*), Sergei Polunin (*Dancer*) and Carlos Acosta (*Yuli*) - and, as film-making goes, it offers a direct, straightforward and rewarding account of a dancer's career. It embodies an honourable tradition of documentary film-making - *Omnibus*, *Arena* and *the South Bank Show* - aimed to bring the best of the arts to the widest audience in the most comprehensive and comprehensible manner possible, with television telling the human story. As a film it does what television does best and gets up close and personal, providing an account of an artist at work behind the scenes, showing their process and stagecraft in a way that the stage does not and cannot. It offers a unique insight.

The researchers have been hard at work, providing footage of Osipova from the family archives and early in her career with the Bolshoi. Early training in gymnastics caused injuries, which in turn caused her parents to seek an alternative career path, although she now recognises the value of goal-setting and the importance of will power to her future career in dance. Although at post-show discussions at the premiere, when she was quizzed about her teachers at school, it

was her drama teacher to whom she referred as being the most influential on her future career.

The film elegantly and easily establishes Osipova's bona fides, with exquisite footage of her in *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* and *La Bayadère*. On screen there is such clear and incontrovertible evidence of a world star in action. It is irresistible performance footage. But then the film takes the viewer on a journey of her rehearsing *La Bayadère* with Natalia Makarova, moment by moment, drawing on her expertise, as she teases out the meaning of each gesture - a masterclass of the great tradition being understood and inherited. And then the journey continues away from the classical world to the experimental movement vocabulary of modern dance, to Jonathan Goddard and Arthur Pita, with whom she has formed a solid artistic partnership.

There is extensive footage of her experimenting with Goddard. The roll and fluency of their partnership, bearing and giving weight as they move together, is transfixing, as is the rehearsal footage of her hard at work on *Mother*. *Mother* is Arthur Pita's take on the Hans Christian Anderson tale of the trials of motherhood, into which is woven brilliant folkloric movement derived from her adolescence in Moscow. The range, energy and embodied expertise is truly remarkable. By the age of 32 she seems to have achieved all a dancer can do. "What next?" is the obvious question.

In the interviews, bravely



Natalia Osipova in *The Mother*. © Anastasia Tiknonova

conducted in English on the film, she explained her unwavering commitment to the classical world and to The Royal Ballet, which provides her with precisely the right environment in which she can flourish as well as the freedom to explore her own projects. She is not budging from London. If there is a problem with the film, it is just 20 minutes too long. We have learnt everything that we need to know by the time we reach Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui - in which he repeats lamely everything that has been previously said about her - and the benighted *Medusa*. It is a good one-hour television documentary and not a feature film. It is sponsored, thankfully, by Sky Arts, without which it would never have been made. Whatever happened to dance and to arts documentaries on mainstream television?