

Vogue arts

Dangerous DANCING

Has ballet prodigy and self-styled rebel Sergei Polunin finally left controversy behind him, asks *Christa D'Souza*

Sergei Polunin, aka the Bad Boy of Ballet: you don't have to be a balletomane to know who he is. Having been appointed the youngest-ever principal in the Royal Ballet's history, aged 19, the handsome Ukrainian, now 23, is one of those rare prodigies who get mentioned in the same breath as Nureyev and Baryshnikov. Having been whooshed through the ranks of the Royal Ballet and showered with all the leading roles, his future as one of the world's greatest-ever ballet dancers was assured. What a shock it was then, when in the winter of 2012, at the very pinnacle of his career, he walked out of rehearsal never to return.

It is July, and the opening night of *Coppélia* at the Coliseum (Polunin's first performance here since his other much-headlined walk-out, when he jacked in Peter Schaufuss's ballet production of *Midnight Express* earlier this year). He is transfixing in the lead role of Franz, and as he gooses the edge of a ballerina's tutu, naughtily biting his lower lip and raising his eyes skywards, one can almost hear the audience's collective swoon. A good hour after the last triumphant curtain call and we all wait for him to emerge from his dressing room. Finally, as if out of >

POLUNIN: "THE HANDSOME UKRAINIAN WHO GETS MENTIONED IN THE SAME BREATH AS NUREYEV AND BARYSHNIKOV". SITTINGS EDITOR: SARANNE WOODCROFT. PHOTOGRAPH: NIK HARTLEY

GROOMING: ROJU ROPPOINGI. SERGEI WEARS BRETON TOP AND TROUSERS, BOTH MEADHAM KIRCHHOFF





To watch an exclusive video of Sergei Polunin, download Vogue's iPad app

nowhere, he appears at the entrance in jeans and a black bomber to which his sunglasses are clipped. Off he goes, feet at ten to two, into the adoring, expectant fray.

Sergei and I have met before. The last time was at the Ivy Club, after a performance in *Marguerite and Armand* at Covent Garden, months before his notorious walk-out. We were joined by his dancing partner Tamara Rojo (now artistic director of the English National Ballet) and his then girlfriend, Helen Crawford (a soloist at the Royal Ballet nine years his senior). He mostly talked about how little money he made as a dancer and how he was interested in the idea of getting into the fashion business or movies. One could tell by his restlessness and general air of disaffection that something was up.

"Yeah, I was strange that night," agrees Sergei, with his shy lopsided smile. "But now Igor is here, it's something I can't explain, but I'm normal. Usually I hate it when someone is controlling me, but with him, I don't mind." This is Igor Zelensky, his mentor and – as artistic director of Moscow's esteemed Stanislavsky Ballet company, which put on this production – his new boss. He's a tall, smooth blond, who at first glimpse calls to mind the archetypal Russian baddie in a Bond movie.

It is around two o'clock the following day and we are in a photo studio in Hackney, where the *Vogue* shoot has just taken place. In contrast to the feisty, swaggering presence he commands on stage, Polunin is quite cipher-like in the flesh, adolescent-seeming almost, with his pale skin and fine hair. It is only when he obediently dances a few steps for the camera, and with a mere jut of his chin or the angle of a palm conveys a breadth of emotions, that one gets an inkling of his showmanship and phenomenal talent. Those cheekbones, meanwhile, those slanted light-green eyes, that delicately gnarled dancer's body covered in tattoos... No wonder he has been photographed by

Gus Van Sant and Bruce Weber (who shot him for a short Dior Homme film); no wonder Hollywood has come calling ("to play a Russian vampire in some *Twilight*-type thing, but I'm not interested in those sorts of films").

He happily talks us through all his "markings". There's the Russian flag on the back of his hand, which upon deciding he didn't like it very much he tried to burn off "the Russian way", with acid. There's the one that says: "I

am not human/I am not God/I am hwo [sic] I am." There, above his left nipple, are the angry, almost tribal-looking scars which he inflicted himself with a razor blade. "I love the look of scars," he shrugs. "I wish they could have been real, you know, like done to me in a fight, but hey..."

An only child, born in 1989 in the shipyard town of Kherson on the Black Sea, "Serezha" was thrust by his poor but ambitious mother, Galina, into the world of ballet at the age of just three. When

he came to White Lodge, the Royal Ballet's lower school, he was only 13 and knew hardly a word of English. All on his own (Galina went back to the Ukraine after three days), and bumped up two years because of the

standard he had reached at ballet school in Kiev, the young, introverted Sergei learnt English by Linguaphone and spent all his spare time practising splits or watching ballet videos, freeze-framing over and over again. It was in his final six months of school, when he was permitted to live off campus in shared digs in Soho, that the signs of rebellion began to emerge. By the age of 21, and with a tendency for depression, he was soon ricocheting out of control – missing morning rehearsals, gaming and experimenting with drugs. As his provocative tweets later revealed, he had been performing at Covent Garden high on cocaine and bragged that he was even keen on trying heroin.

"Yeah, but I was kind of joking with that last one," he says with that shy smile. "I never wanted to be the good example. But Igor, he changed me. It's funny, when we first met I didn't trust him. I never found this unconditional friendship before. I was like, what's the deal, is he gay? After

seven months though, you realise: some people they just click, and we clicked."

Polunin now lives and works out of Moscow, under the watchful tutelage of Zelensky (himself a protégé of Nureyev and a former principal at the Kirov), not tweeting, not playing Xbox, not hanging out with druggie friends, not hanging out with anyone, he claims, except for Igor and his family. The days of staying up all night, in other words, are a thing of the past, although it is not the staying up all night, he says, that affects one's performances; it's holidays that are the worst. "Sure, you can party when you are working; you just sweat it off, it's fine," he says. "Your muscles, though, they disappear in a week. That's why I don't like to go away. In the end it's not worth the time and energy you have to spend to get back to the way you were."

This conflicts somewhat with his boasts that rehearsals bore him and he hates warming up – "Does a lion or tiger go, 'I'm just going to warm up before I attack?' No! He just attacks!" – but one senses there's a quite a lot of conflict roiling within

him. Before last night's performance, for example, I was told he was curled up asleep in a ball to block out his nerves.

The next move for Polunin? Who knows. Over the summer, the head of the Stanislavsky,

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Vladimir Urin, was appointed by the Russian ministry of culture to repair the Bolshoi's battered image after its acid-attack scandal. There is unconfirmed talk Urin will bring Zelensky with him – "And if Igor goes," shrugs Polunin, "I go with him." Which, again, doesn't tally somehow with his ongoing threat of quitting at 26. "Oh, I know he likes to say that he doesn't like dancing," says Tamara Rojo, "but I don't believe it, because I have shared the stage with him many times and he is full of passion and joy on it. So I think he will dance for a lot longer than he says."

"I told him he has at least 10 years in this business," says Zelensky, as expansive and charming as ever when we meet later, after a matinée performance of *Coppélia*. "Ballet is not like sport; you can still dance at 45."

"But he needs someone like me to focus on him. The problem is he has such a natural gift he doesn't *have* to kill himself. But if he did kill himself a little bit? Oh my God, you cannot imagine..." ■