

A new heart for Iranian ballet

THE TIMES,
WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 7 1968

Last July I was watching Iran's National Ballet Company rehearsing in the ramshackle old buildings scattered among the trees next to the shell of a building for years shrouded in scaffolding in the heart of Teheran.

But when I returned from Europe for the Coronation in October, I was astonished to find that the old buildings had disappeared, and in their place, as if by magic, smooth green lawns and terraced gardens with splashing fountains surrounded the magnificent new Rudaki Hall, set like a many-faceted diamond in a crystal jewel-box: floodlit at night, its marble foyers with their traditional mosaics and fabulous crystal chandeliers were thronged with a far more elegantly evening-gowned, tiaraed audience than you'd find in most western capitals.

A few nights ago, with a completely full house, I watched a programme that began with an enchanting and superbly produced folk dance performance, the setting an exquisite Persian miniature, the costumes breath-taking, the lighting and production—all by the company's producer, Nejad Ahmadzadeh—utterly captivating.

The rest of the programme was in the traditional western ballet style, costumed and choreographed by the Company's Maitre de Ballet, Robert de Warren, on loan from London's Royal Ballet Company, whose *Love and the Clown* came across with such verve and ardour that the technical deficiencies inevitable with such a young and relatively inexperienced company no longer mattered. The leading roles were taken by extremely talented artists headed by prima ballerina Aida Ahmadzadeh who has often been described as an outstandingly brilliant ballerina who would take top honours in any western ballet company. As the forlorn little clown it is hard to imagine that she could have been bettered.

It is hard to believe that the Academy was founded by Nejad Ahmadzadeh only in December, 1955, at the suggestion of the Minister of Culture and Arts. "We know we aren't ready yet to dance classical ballet in competition with the best of the western com-

panies", says burly Nejad frankly. "So when we perform before visiting heads of state, or abroad, we keep to our traditional folk themes—we have a long way to go yet, but now that we have a chance to perform regularly, and, we hope, to see visiting companies here, we should progress much faster."

Dame Ninette de Valois has greatly helped the company get established, and Nejad described how, on his way back from a visit to the U.S.A. about 11 years ago, the British Council invited him to stop off in Britain.

"I visited many British ballet companies—Ballet Rambert and the Royal Ballet among them, and there I first met Dame Ninette and invited her to visit us here", he said.

"Dame Ninette first came out in 1958 and at once developed a strong personal interest in the new-born company: she has been back every two or three years since and is hoping to come here this spring.

"She sent us teachers from the Royal Ballet Company, Ann Cook and then the soloists Miro Zolan and his wife Sandra, then Richard Brown and Marion English—they all stayed for two years, and Marion, who married an Iranian and is still with us, teaching in the Academy. For the past 18 months we've been very lucky to have Robert de Warren and his wife Jacqueline. She was a pupil of the great Preobrazhenskaya and not only takes the senior classes but works closely in rehearsals with the soloists of the company.

"When we started the Academy in 1955 we had 80 students between the ages of 8 and 15. In those days they were mainly foreigners but today, out of 250 students only 30 or 40 are foreigners and ballet is no longer regarded as *infra dig*—in fact our Iranian pupils are all from very good families." Like most companies, the difficulty is finding male dancers. There is a chronic shortage of boys and all are liable for national service at 19.

"In fact, four of our dancers are in the Army now, but they are given special leave to dance with the company for Imperial Command performances!"

SYLVIA MATHESON



Rudaki Hall, Teheran's new opera house, has electronically controlled lighting and seats 1,600 people.