

## **More extension yet to Guillem's skill**

### ***BALLET***

*Valerie Lawson*

At age 40, one of the world's most revered dancers continues to push the boundaries, writes Valerie Lawson in London.

Sylvie Guillem has no need to race to the bookshop for a 2006 diary.

For the past nine years, she has kept track of her life with a massive 10-year diary, which ends in December next year.

In London, after a recent dress rehearsal of *Marguerite & Armand* at Covent Garden, she threatened: "When it's finished, this diary, I stop dancing. I have no more future."

Just kidding. Guillem will soon be plotting her schedule for the next five years, at least. Next year alone looks as punishing as ever for the 40-year-old French ballerina.

It begins with her fourth appearance in Australia, when she dances a solo called *Two*, and in the heart-stopping *pas de trois Broken Fall* at the Sydney Festival with the former Royal Ballet dancers William Trevitt and Michael Nunn.

Heart-stopping for the audience, that is, as the former gymnast and one of the world's most renowned ballet dancers hurls herself, in breathtaking falls, from the arms of her partners, who catch her just in time.

"It's true there are some very dangerous moments," Guillem says, "but the guys know they have to be there." I bet they do. Imagine dropping Guillem.

*Broken Fall*, choreographed by Russell Maliphant, premiered almost two years ago at London's Royal Opera House, Guillem's home base from 1989 when she quit the Paris Opera Ballet.

Guillem is one of only two ballerinas who can sell out the Royal Opera House, the other being Darcey Bussell, a Royal Ballet principal who is to become a principal guest artist next year.

Unlike Bussell, Guillem has no children and is pushing her astonishing body into new choreographic directions in collaboration with the British choreographers Maliphant and Akram Khan.

We met in her dressing room at the Royal Opera House after the rehearsal for *Marguerite & Armand*, one of her calling cards.

"I do *Marguerite* because I love it," she says. "It's something special for me."

Guillem had wiped her *Marguerite* make-up clean, let out her long, dark red hair, was smoking a post-performance cigarette in a black holder, and wearing what appeared to be a black plastic raincoat.

But the first thing that strikes one about Guillem is her intelligence. The second, her sense of humour, evident on her own quirky website, [sylvieguillem.com](http://sylvieguillem.com), which reveals her playfulness, with its oddball ballet synopses - "she dies", "he dies", "nothing happens" and so on, and the home page which shows Guillem twisting her mouth into a grimace, then releasing the face and opening her eyes wide.

"That's my kid's side," she says. "I was just playing with the light and mood."

Famous for not allowing photographs of herself to be published without her approval, Guillem this year produced what she calls her "autobiography", *Invitation*. Again, it is not conventional, but an invitation to step into her professional and personal worlds. The weighty book, huge in its dimensions, and retailing for ££35 (\$83), sold out its initial print run of 5000 copies. "It's a kind of voyage," Guillem says. "It's the dancer, the woman, what I like. All those pictures are worth more than words."

Among all the photos of Guillem as baby, child, teenager and woman there is some text, in French, English and Japanese. Her fan base is huge in Japan, where she makes big money during her regular appearances. She will appear there again next month in her party piece, Maurice Bejart's Bolero, before dancing in Europe in a new program of works next year, first by Maliphant, then, in the northern autumn, in new solos and a duet, in collaboration with Khan.

When she saw Maliphant's choreography for the first time, as an audience member, Guillem thought: "God, it gives me the will to go [on.] I'm attracted to that kind of movement and the contrast between the serenity of his work and his strength.

"It's always developing in a way that surprises you - you use all the space, and the floor, and it's not only always being on your feet. You experience working with the strength of your arm, the weight of your partner. It's very complex and simple at the same time."

As for Broken Fall, with its extreme balances and the trust that goes with them, "sometimes it's a matter of seconds for me to fall or not to fall. You need to calculate, and it's a huge concentration, but at the same time, because of the kind of serenity in his choreography, it's laid back.

"It's hard physically because it's long, 26 minutes, but it's very pleasant because it's very flowing."

Classical ballet diehards will be pleased Guillem has not abandoned that artform and will dance in Manon this year and Romeo & Juliet next year, the latter at the Royal Opera House. Although, "considering the repertoire they have, it's nothing for me there.

"Manon? It's beautiful, it's still something I enjoy and grow into it and also Romeo, but La Sylphide, I never wanted to do it, for example. Ondine, I never wanted to do. It's all those things that are back and I don't want to do it."

Sleeping Beauty, perhaps? "I've done it many times. I think I've done what I had to do in it."

And directing her own productions is also on hold, despite her successful production of Giselle, first seen in Helsinki then in Milan. "I don't have time. It's much more detail than only choreography. If you have to take care of the dancers and dance at the same time, I mean you're drained. When I do something, I want to give everything I have and the experience I have with Helsinki, when they asked me to put it on stage and to dance the first night, it was a nightmare because I hardly rehearsed. I was spending my time with all the other cast, with the costume, with the designers. When I did it again in La Scala, I said 'OK, you want me to do, but I tell you, I don't dance the first night. I suffer too much.'"

But there will be more Guillem productions, eventually.

"The classical [ballet] for me is dying, so you have so much opportunity to make it alive again. There is something in classical that should not be treated the way it is. Of course I've thought about it a lot."

On one wall of her dressing room she has pinned a cluster of paper cranes, given to her by Japanese fans. They are, she says, a symbol of long life. Her fans wish Guillem would go on forever. The dance world needs her to.

Sylvie Guillem and George Piper Dances are at the Sydney Theatre from January 19-23 as part of the Sydney Festival.