



*Self-portrait shot for French Vogue by Sylvie Guillem/ Gilles Tapie*

## **Sylvie Guillem by Maria Yacoob**

To watch Sylvie Guillem dance on stage is to be pinned to your seat by a vital, physical force so intense it knocks the breath from your chest. The ease and grace of her incredible movement belies her lifetime of gruelling physical exertion, but the fire in her gaze reveals her unmistakable power as a performer. You can sit up in the gods, hundreds of metres away from the stage, and still know instantly when it's Guillem dancing. She is pure power.

Sylvie Guillem is a dancer like no other. She casts her body as a site for limitless possibilities. She can do this because her body is like no other. Long sinewy limbs, highly arched feet, poise, posture, ferocious strength – these are all stock-in-trade for professional dancers. But Guillem takes everything further. Her flexibility is legendary. Her limbs are longer and go further, her feet are more arched, she jumps higher and, with every exhalation, her torso tightens and ripples – a corset of pure muscle. She pushes

her body to the absolute peak of its extraordinary facility and makes it look effortless.

Guillem has the exquisite, 180°-plus extensions that typify classical ballet, the fluidity and weighted quality required by contemporary dance and the fearless athleticism to perform heart-stopping lifts and throws in pas de deux and partnered work. She was the first world-class ballerina to cross these boundaries with her movement and the first to break free from the world's top opera houses to demand artistic control of her own career. She is a balletic iconoclast who remains both an idol and a torch bearer for young dancers who want to push their own creative limits.

Guillem's training differed from most young ballerinas. She was initially a gymnast and grew up with a regime and mindset focused on pushing her body to accomplish incredible acrobatic feats. When she first entered the Paris Opera Ballet school on an exchange programme, she balked at the tedious repetition of ballet exercises and the teachers' meticulous critique of every movement. But when she took to the stage to perform, she knew she found her calling.

She was just a teenager when the company's artistic director, the legendary Rudolph Nureyev, spotted her precocious talents. Nureyev recognised in Guillem his own hunger to perform. He repeatedly chose her to partner him and cast her in solo and principal roles in his stagings of classic ballets.

Crucially, he also encouraged her to dance works by contemporary choreographers such as George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins and William Forsythe. These modern choreographers were interested in exploring new physical expressionism through dance, and in abstract movement as well as the traditional storytelling of classical ballet. They lit the fire of Guillem's desire to go further with her body, and piqued her intellectual interest too.

Guillem was the star of the Paris Opera Ballet, then the star of the Royal Ballet for more than 20 years. When she took on classic roles such as Juliet, Manon, Marguerite and Giselle, she didn't dance to look pretty; she lived her roles with ferocious intensity, both physically and emotionally. Her astonishing strength and range of movement meant her legs extended further than had ever been seen on stage. Her gymnastic background helped her leap higher and more fearlessly than any ballerina had done before, performing double-turning jumps four feet above the head of her partner before abandoning her body to his arms. Her emotional and intellectual drive meant she took her roles deeper than both her predecessors and her contemporaries.

Guillem always knew what she wanted. She point-blank refused to dance any work she didn't think was right for her, and strived to keep pushing her physical and intellectual limits. She exemplified the style of William Forsythe's post-modern ballets such as, 'In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated', which ditched storytelling in favour of savage abstract movement so quick, extreme and difficult it was simply beyond the capabilities of most dancers.

But equally, she could command the stage without dancing a step. When she took the title role in Mats Ek's contemporary take on Carmen, she projected power and sensuality simply standing centre stage, in a long red dress, puffing on a fat cigar.

In 2006, a year before Guillem left the Royal Ballet, she took up a new post as associate artist of Sadlers Wells, which she has since used to forge a series of rich, creative partnerships with some of the world's leading contemporary choreographers.

One of her most celebrated dance relationships is with Russell Maliphant, whose uniquely graceful movement vocabulary is based on contemporary dance, tai chi and capoeira – a long way from the pirouettes and port de bras of ballet. Guillem asked Maliphant to create work for her, leading to the hypnotic 'Two' – which Guillem dances almost on the spot, inside a box of shifting light – and the seminal 'Push', a duet for Guillem and Maliphant, in which they seamlessly twine around each others' bodies with supreme beauty.

This year, as Guillem approaches her sixth decade, she admits that maintaining her body is a full-time job. She spends one or two hours a day performing strengthening

and stretching exercises that simply enable her to 'get into' her body so it is ready to start dancing properly. But she still does things most dancers will never do, and makes shapes most dancers will never make.

Guillem has redefined many things in her unparalleled career: the physical limits, intensity and stage presence of a performer; the control a prima ballerina has over her own work; her trajectory on leaving the world's elite opera houses; and the longevity of a world-class artiste who continues to learn and discover new ways to move. She remains a force to be reckoned with.

**Maria Yacoob is a dance teacher, choreographer and writer.**