

Sylvie Guillem – the world’s best dancer

Extract from an article by Suzanna Clarke.

Sylvie Guillem is widely known as the "world's best dancer".

As Rudolf Nureyev's protege, Sylvie Guillem became the star of the Paris Opera Ballet at 19. When she quit in tumultuous circumstances, *Le Monde* reported it as "a tragedy for France". However, she soon took up as principal guest artist of London's Royal Ballet and stayed there for 12 years.

Now she has developed an equally impressive reputation as a contemporary dancer working with outstanding choreographers, including kathak master Akram Khan, with whom she is currently touring in *Sacred Monsters*. The title comes from 19th-century artistic divas such as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanor Duse, forerunners of the modern cult of celebrity. The work premiered in London at the end of 2006

Guillem's reputation is based on her technical brilliance, in particular, earwhacking leg extensions which some critics say ruin the classical line while others believe take ballet to new heights.

She is also known for speaking her mind, which has earned her the nickname "Madame Non".

What Guillem has done her entire life is to take risks that have taken her far above the realm of the ordinary. And this is what has led her to contemporary dance. What she was always seeking, she says, had nothing to do with fame; rather, it was a true expression of who she was. A shy person, she says the stage gave her the capacity to be who she wanted.

She was born in 1965 in an outer Paris suburb. Her mother was a gymnastics teacher, her father was a garage mechanic. Her mother taught the young Sylvie gymnastics, at which she excelled.

Then an exchange program with the Paris Opera Ballet School gave her the chance to try out ballet for a year, and she never went back. Her interest in contemporary dance developed early. When Rudolf Nureyev became director of the Paris Opera, they started to do so much more outside the classical world.

She fell out with him when she was 24 over her desire to dance roles outside the Paris Opera without constantly seeking its approval. There was shock and disbelief when she left, but her work with the Royal Ballet brought her to the attention of a wider audience, and greater acclaim.

Favourite ballets from her classical years include *Manon* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

These days she has retained London as her base, and constantly travels the world with her partner, photographer Gilles Tapie.