

Renegade in Tights

The ballerina
as fashion idol.

“What I dislike most is ordinary,” sighs Maria Kochetkova, principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet. She’s admiringly describing a homeless man she watched yesterday strolling down Market Street in a propeller-topped hat and asymmetrical neon pants. An unusual muse; but then again, the pixieish Kochetkova has a taste for the unorthodox, clad as she is in a busy floral-print sweatshirt, Yayoi Kusama polka-dot pants, and lipstick-red oxfords. Fresh from her morning class in the ballet’s Hayes Valley studios, she wears her long, brown hair piled atop her head in an untamed nest, and rows of turquoise and silver rings glint from both hands. “I much more enjoy looking at that crazy person than someone in a plain T-shirt, jeans, and Nikes,” she says, looking pained at the thought. “It upsets me.”

The 29-year-old Russian, an alumnus of the Royal Ballet and the English National Ballet, is fast becoming San Francisco’s representative on the international fashion circuit, as revered for her zany, mismatched style as for her fouettés. She boasts 16,000 followers on

by **Lauren Murrow** portrait by **Claudia Goetzelmann**

Kochetkova
dances into
fall on
page 88.

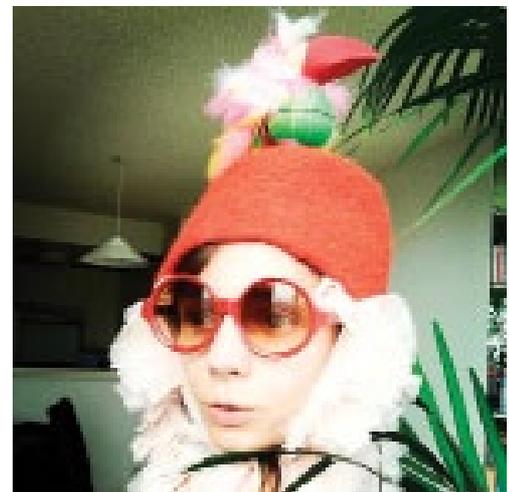
Instagram and 189,000 on Twitter (which she pronounces “Tweet-er,” her accent tinged with traces of Moscow and London). Indeed, says Allan Ulrich, dance correspondent at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Kochetkova was one of the very first ballerinas in the company who learned the art of self-promotion.” She’s traveled to New York (where she received a private tour of the Rain Room at MoMA), Los Angeles (partied with DJ-about-town Wade Crescent), Houston, Vail, Moscow (photographed with actor Ralph Fiennes), London, Barcelona, Venice (hobnobbed with *Purple* editor Olivier Zahm at the Biennale), Florence, Panama City, and Cabo—all in the past six months. She favors young, new-wave designers—Ulyana Sergeenko from Moscow, Julien David from Tokyo, MSGM from Milan, Olympia Le-Tan from Paris—and has a particular penchant for oversize, Lennon-style sunglasses and dramatic coats. Her latest prize is a reversible cloak by the Russian designer Tatiانا Parfionova: solid black on one side, cerulean on the other, a pair of black swans with interlocking necks spiraling up the spine. “Yesterday I was in a bad mood, so I was wearing the black side,” she says, with a wry grin. “People know: Don’t talk to me when the coat is black.”

Though Kochetkova projects a larger-than-life persona—that of a party-hopping bon vivant rocking, say, a lime green coat and turquoise shades—in reality, she admits, she’s shy and often insecure. Her signature, face-obscuring glasses are as much a security blanket—“like being behind a window”—as a jaunty accessory. “Because of what I do and where life took me, I have a strong heart and I’ve had to fight for things,” she says, “but I wasn’t born that way. I had to teach myself to be that way.”

Where she’s short on self-assurance, Kochetkova compensates with unalloyed ambition. Following a childhood of ice-skating and gymnastics, she began training with the Bolshoi School at the age of 10. At 17, she was granted an apprenticeship at the Royal Ballet, and later went on to the English National Ballet. London, where she lived for five years before becoming a principal here in 2007, still feels like home. It’s where she met her husband, social product designer Edward King, when a mutual friend tasked him with squiring a pack of Bolshoi dancers around town. They ended up at a private nightclub, where they discussed social media and YouTube. “I was never attracted to dancers,” she says.

After the rigors of the Bolshoi and the creative constraints of the English National Ballet, Kochetkova has come into her own in San Francisco, where choreographers Christopher Wheeldon, Yuri Possokhov, Wayne McGregor, and Helgi Tómasson have created principal roles for her. She’ll be reprising the lead role in Wheeldon’s *Cinderella*, which debuted here in May, in New York next month. She also dances in her native Russia several times a year, but the home-

“People don’t know how I dance right off the planes. I take a red-eye flight and go straight to the theater.”



Snapshots from Kochetkova's Instagram feed.

comings can be ego bruising. “They criticize me, usually,” she says. “It’s almost like, ‘Oh, you left—now show me what you learned.’”

If Russian audiences are history-steeped ballet buffs and Londoners clamor for full-length crowd-pleasers like *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*, Kochetkova says, local fans fall comfortably in between. She relishes the San Francisco Ballet’s reputation for taking creative risks with both new choreographers and international ballet styles. “She has a very, very good pedigree,” says Ulrich. “She’s very lyrical and has a beautiful line. But she stands out because of her training and her authentic Russian style.”

If a ballerina’s career is often characterized as a marathon, Kochetkova casts hers as a 20-year sprint. After practicing eight hours a day, five to six days a week, she jets off to dance as a guest with the Mariinsky, Bolshoi, or Tokyo ballets. Earlier this year, she left for the train station in St. Petersburg, Russia, late on a Thursday night after dancing *Giselle* at the Mariinsky Theatre. She took the overnight train to Moscow and

boarded a plane to Tampa, Florida, where she performed at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts that Saturday night. Early the next morning, she caught a flight back to Moscow, took a train back to St. Petersburg, and danced in *The Nutcracker* at the Mariinsky on Tuesday. “Yes, I get stressed,” she says, dryly. “Still, knowing myself, I would rather do it like this than not at all.”

Her most memorable roles, Kochetkova says, have been those that require a duality: *Giselle*, first an innocent peasant girl, then a lovelorn madwoman (*Giselle* will kick off the San Francisco company’s 2014 season); *Odette and Odile*, the opposing beacons of good and evil in *Swan Lake*. “Instead of playing a character, I try to feel it in my own skin,” she says. “It’s very interesting, as an artist, to portray those two different arcs—to be able to leave this on the stage.”

Then the introvert in fluoro-florals pulls on her double-sided coat, dons a pair of crimson Coke-bottle glasses, and swishes purposefully away, the pair of intertwined swans billowing behind her. □