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Bolshoi is Back

Troupe brings revamped 'Swan' to KenCen

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Article Text:

Bolshoi means big in Russian, and the Bolshoi Ballet lives up to that name in more ways than it might sometimes wish. Everything about the company seems larger than life.

It's big in its dancing style: Grandeur, heroic gestures, thrusting leaps and an emphasis on raw male power are its signature features.

The umbrella Bolshoi Theatre is big in numbers: The staff, including that for the opera, chorus, orchestra, ballet and support operations, numbers almost 2,500. But massive government support has shrunk drastically, and foreign appearances such as the ballet's performances at the Kennedy Center's Opera House next week are increasingly crucial to its survival.

Cultural-political wars also have figured big in the company for decades.

Headlines in newspapers and magazines have spelled out some of its troubles: "Russian ballet reflects shifts in cultural power," "A 'lurching' Bolshoi still thinks big," "Crisis at the Bolshoi," "On their toes and trading blows," "Russia's cultural showcase is a snakepit of back stabbing and rumors" and "The czar's last dance: Did Yuri Grigorovich preserve Russian dance or destroy it?"

A vastly different hierarchy will preside over the troupe during its engagement here next week than the one for its last appearance in 2000. A new general director, a new general artistic director and a new director of the ballet are in charge, with a group headed on the female side by three ballerinas not seen during the earlier performances. Anatoly Iksanov is the general director and Boris Akimov the artistic director.

Nina Ananiashvili, a ballerina with a huge international following, led all the opening-night performances last time at the Kennedy Center. During that tour, enthusiastic reviews called the Bolshoi a "renewed" company.

The long shadow of Yuri Grigorovich, appointed principal choreographer of the company in 1964 and later its artistic director, still marks the Bolshoi.

Mr. Grigorovich, now 77, changed the company style, partly in response to fresh winds that blew in from Western companies such as the New York City Ballet. Extensive mime scenes were eliminated. The company he molded was not so much classical as dramatic. He created blockbuster ballets such as "Spartacus," and brought dancers Vladimir Vasiliev and Ekaterina Maximova to the fore.

He created many enemies as time went on, most notably the spectacular and headstrong ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. In her recent autobiography, she wrote: "The love of power dries up the creator, taking away drop by drop the talent for creation, makes the person petty. That's what happened to Grigorovich."

After a reign of 30 years by Mr. Grigorovich - a long time in the ballet world - dissatisfaction in the company ran high and important dancers left. Irek Mukhamedov joined England's Royal Ballet, Yuri Possokhov became a major figure at the San Francisco Ballet, and Andris Liepa went to the Kirov Ballet.

Mr. Grigorovich eventually was forced to leave and was succeeded in 1995 by Mr. Vasiliev, who became director of the entire Bolshoi Theatre. Alexei Fadeychev, who had been a frequent partner of ballerina Ananiashvili's, became director of the ballet.

This was the team when the Bolshoi appeared here in 2000.

Mr. Fadeychev later was dismissed and cited a dispute over Mr. Grigorovich's "Swan Lake" as one of the reasons. He was told by Anatoly Iksanov, the new general director of the theater, he had to cancel plans he had made to acquire George Balanchine's "Bugaku" and other new works and instead restage the Grigorovich version of "Swan Lake." "I don't want to stay in this position only to oversee the second world premiere of Grigorovich's 32-year-old 'Swan Lake,'" Mr. Fadeychev said at the time.

Never underestimate Mr. Grigorovich's staying power. His long-running "Swan Lake" will be danced Wednesday and next Saturday with the claim that new touches have been added to this version.

Set to a meltingly tender score by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky, the perennially popular ballet tells the story of an enchanted maiden turned into a swan queen, Odette, by the evil Von Rothbart. Her love for Prince Siegfried is betrayed when the prince is seduced by the alluring black swan, Odile, whom he mistakes for Odette.

These are not the only performances of Mr. Grigorovich's "Swan Lake" to be danced here this season. The Grigorovich Ballet, a group the director formed 12 years ago, danced his "Swan Lake" less than two months ago at George Mason University's Center for the Arts in Fairfax.

The program notes for the Grigorovich "Swan Lake" were identical to those for the Bolshoi's "Swan Lake" next week - with one interesting exception. The Grigorovich Ballet's version ends with, "Hoping to atone for his betrayal, he (Prince Siegfried) rushes in despair after the receding image of the white swan."

The Bolshoi's notes say, "As dawn breaks, he finds himself alone on the empty banks of the lake of his dreams."

Whether this slightly different description covers the same action onstage will become evident next week.

The ending of "Swan Lake" has been a problem for Russian ballet. Under the Soviets, the tragic parting of the lovers was decreed unacceptable. Happy endings were de rigueur. In the West, audiences have seen all sorts of endings for "Swan Lake." At American Ballet Theatre, both lovers spectacularly throw themselves off a high cliff, then are seen in an afterlife image floating together on a barge. In Russian versions, true love wins out, and the lovers face down the evil Von Rothbart.

Although "Swan Lake" received its first performance at the Bolshoi in 1877, its glorious music was met by hackneyed choreography and soon dropped out of the repertoire. Tchaikovsky died thinking it had been a failure. Then, in 1895 a new version was produced at the Maryinsky Ballet (also called the Kirov Ballet) with choreography by Marius Petipa and, for its inspired second act, by Lev Ivanov.

At the Kirov, Petipa also created "La Bayadere," the other work the Bolshoi is bringing to the Kennedy Center. Its third-act "Kingdom of the Shades" is one of the most sublime moments in ballet. Although the Bolshoi danced "La Bayadere" for many years, the piece disappeared from its repertoire for more than 40 years before Mr. Grigorovich created his own version of it. That version will be seen here Thursday, Friday and June 16.

The "bigness" of the Bolshoi promises to be on display at the company's opening gala Tuesday. The event is the first of a 10-year, \$10 million project: the **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation** Series for Artistic Excellence.

Mrs. Reynolds is the philanthropist who gave \$38 million with several strings attached to the Smithsonian Institution, then revoked the donation when her conditions led to a wave of criticism. This time she emphasized there were "no strings," and Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser arranged a suitably grand event.

The Bolshoi Opera Chorus and soloists are flying here for the one-night-only appearance with the Bolshoi Ballet. Together, they will perform a series of excerpts from Russian ballets and operas.

The Bolshoi performances next week are sold out, but the company will return to the Kennedy Center in December to dance "The Nutcracker" - choreographed by Mr. Grigorovich - and again next spring for the center's International Ballet Festival.

Caption:

Dancers of the Bolshoi Ballet perform the "Shadows" scene from "La Bayadere" (top) and a scene from the ballet's second act (above). Dimitri Belogolovtsev dances to "Swan Lake" (left). [3 photos, NO CREDIT]

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