

UNIFICATION: RUSSIAN WEEKLY NEWSPAPER IN AUSTRALIA SINCE 1950

27/12/2015

Know Your Heroes: “Romeo and Juliet” in Newcastle

by Anastasia Grib

In the midst of preparations for Christmas, on December 13 at Newcastle’s Civic Theatre, a festive ballet evening took place. The National College of Dance & The Marie Walton-Mahon Dance Academy (a) put up a show summarizing the entire school year. For some of the children, it was their final event, for others a stage debut.

Viewers were offered a Triple Bill, each part of which could make an independent and complete show. It was a journey through time. For a warm up, students performed a Grand Pas from the ballet *Paquita*, paying tribute to the legacy of Marius Petipa. In the second act, they presented a shorter version of *The Sleeping Beauty*, with elements from classical and contemporary dance. And for dessert, the one-act ballet *Romeo and Juliet* premiered, with choreographic text composed by the teachers of the school. As a postscript, children danced a number of jazz compositions, all to the thunderous applause from the public.

The Decor for *Paquita* and *The Sleeping Beauty* (b) were provided by the Australian Ballet Company. The ballet *Romeo and Juliet* was written anew, including the music for a violin and a saxophone quartet that was commissioned specifically for this occasion from two composers, Matthew Hindson and Cyrus Myurant. Every element fell right into place here: the tense group scenes and the heart-piercing solos, the duets, the trios, and also the musicians who had a spectacular part to play in what was happening on the stage.

One should be amazed at the very short time it took to prepare the performance – a total of only five weeks (c). The viewers were leaving the hall stunned; even those familiar with the Mariinsky Ballet were pleasantly surprised. Accompanied by standing ovations, the show ran for close to four hours.

Despite all this length, watching it was not boring. No thought of “a vinaigrette” crossed your mind, thanks to the thoughtful composition of the individual parts and the great overall dramaturgy of the concert. The children have a great sense of rhythm: this was particularly on display in the contemporary pieces. Their zeal and endurance, the blow-your-mind-away plasticity of their bodies, their superb artistry – all created an unparalleled drive, from the very first minute to the very last.

In classical dance, the technical level of students compares, for example, to the Perm Ballet School in Russia. Some differences are also clearly there, namely the greater emphasis on contemporary choreography and the variegated physical parameters of the dancers. However, the students are all strong and confident performers. They set no artificial limits for themselves but also completely lack vulgarity.

The history of the school is quite remarkable. In 1984, the Australian dancer Marie Walton-Mahon started a ballet academy, and on this foundation, in 2007, the National College of Dance was established. In 2010, the position of Artistic Director passed on to Brett Morgan who worked previously in the troupe of the Australian Ballet and was the head of the Sydney Dance Company. With location outside downtown Newcastle in Lambton, the school is a regular supplier of professional cadre to ballet schools and companies not only in Australia and the “near abroad”, but also as far away as Europe (e.g., Ballet Bejart in Lausanne, Switzerland) and Israel (The Batsheva Dance Company). Children attend classes after regular school hours, usually two times a week. The course includes classical and modern dance, plus jazz, hip-hop, warm-up at the barre, and the elements of gymnastics and acting.

Members of the faculty are quite distinguished to be mentioned here. “The country must know its heroes”: they are dedicated individuals who are devoted to forging new talent for the big stage while doing this far from the madding crowd. For example, one of the choreographers of *Romeo and Juliet*, Timothy Gordon, has on his resume teaching work at the Vienna Opera ballet company, Stuttgart Ballet, and the Royal Danish Ballet. Add to this Australia, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. To give an idea about the scale of Tim’s talent, he worked with such distinguished artists as Jiri Kylian and Maurice Bejart, and choreographed for the Frankfurt Ballet whose head was William Forsythe. Later in his career, Tim started his own dance troupe in New Zealand, Company Z Dance (see www.timothygordon.com).

A New Zealander by birth, this amazing choreographer is at home with the Russian culture, and he studies Russian to read Pushkin in his spare time (d). Tim shares with us that his strongest influence as an artist has been Maya Plisetskaya, whom he was happy to have met in person. Plisetskaya belongs to the absolute top place in Tim’s personal pantheon. Add to this one more remarkable fact from Tim’s biography: Galina Ulanova once flew all the way from Russia in order to work with the Australian Ballet. Ulanova watched a rehearsal of one of his ballets for the Australian Ballet. Impressed by what she saw, said she would like Tim to visit Moscow and work at the Bolshoi Theatre. Had he acted on this invitation, we would be certainly familiar with many ballets which this New Zealander could add to the Russian choreographic repertoire.

Brett Morgan also imparts to his students a special appreciation of Russia. Brett speaks warmly about his time at the Mariinsky Theatre where he had a chance to dance as a young man. The school has some Russian students as well. One of the top students, Lawrence Lambert, is now finishing the course at the Vaganova Ballet Academy in St Petersburg.

Should any parent be asking where to send a child to learn dance, let them choose without hesitation The National College of Dance. No one will abuse your child verbally in that place or “beat her up with a ruler” – instead, you will find the whole process built around creativity. The teachers believe strongly in the self-motivation of students and parents. If your goal is to grow as a professional performer, who is at home both in classical and in contemporary dance, and has not gone mental in the process, stop looking for a better place. This is a real chance for your child, when they grow up to dance on one of the top world stages, including, if the stars look at you, at the Bolshoi and the Mariinsky Theatres.

The next step for *Romeo and Juliet* will be to go on tour to Sydney and, probably, to South America. From there, it won’t be too far also to pay a visit to Russia.

<http://nationalcollegeofdance.com>

Notes:

- (a) The National College of Dance and Junior Academy
- (b) The Australian Ballet provided the back cloth for *Aurora's Wedding*
- (c) The rehearsal period is in the final term of the year covering 10 weeks
- (d) Bilingual version of Pushkin