

# Russian ballet excels in show

St. Petersburg company  
puts fresh twist on  
'Romeo and Juliet.'

BY JOAN PIKULA

SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

St. Petersburg Ballet Theater's "Romeo and Juliet," performed at the Lila Cockrell Theater Monday night, was a fresh and welcome interpretation of Shakespeare's play. The company's artistic director, Yuri Petukhov, created what amounts to a new ballet while remaining true to the essence of a work that has captured the imagination of so many choreographers.

The first refreshing aspect of the Petukhov version is the set design. No mammoth, cumbersome sets are wheeled into place as backdrops for the dancing here. Instead, simple scrims, long, shifting, golden-tipped poles and billowing fabric (designed by Emil Kapelyush), along with lush lighting (designed by Irina Vavilova and Anna Makhalova) create an ever-changing environment for the dancers.

Russian dancers are renowned for their vibrant enthusiasm and dazzling technique, which holds true for the St. Petersburg ensemble. The most stunning dancers at this performance were Anastasia Filipcheva (as the ever-present spirit Queen Mab), Ilya Zabolin's air-lifting Tybalt, Alexander Akulov's gentle and lyrical Romeo, and, of course, Juliet, danced by Anna Borodulina with fluidity, grace and, when the time came, an anguish that transcended the boundaries of the stage.

While Petukhov did not abandon the classic ballet language for his new version, he did spice it up with delicious variations of that language. The peasants danced with rousing determination, often flexing

## DANCE REVIEW

their feet or assuming unusual positions with their partners. The breathtaking neoclassical pas de deux created for Romeo and Juliet were filled with spectacular twists, turns and extensions — traditional dances touched with a modern sensibility.

Unusual were the scenes in Queen Mab's "world of dreams," where Romeo and Juliet enact their tragic tale as a preamble to the ballet. Queen Mab, whose appearances throughout the ballet herald catastrophe, began her wizardry here, turning up again and again to wreak havoc. She isn't meant to be evil, but her intrusion into the activities, and her control of the outcome of each, never bodes well.

The fight scenes between Tybalt and Mercutio were beautifully staged and much less flamboyant than in some versions. A shorter death scene for Mercutio would have been nice, but then how would all that death music written for him by Prokofiev be used?

Petukhov's company also has an excellent corps de ballet, for whom he created strong, imaginative shifting patterns in scene after scene. Often, these dancers lived in Queen Mab's world and, in their flesh-colored unitards, seemed like vulnerable

and benign spirits.

The variations for the men were particularly exciting. These were primarily for Tybalt and his cohorts or Romeo and his, all of whom danced with boldness and bravura tempered with a stylistic grace that appears, at this stage, to be one of Petukhov's refinements to the classic Russian male technique.

It would be lovely to see this company perform all the works in its repertoire, especially those touched by Petukhov. Perhaps one day the troupe will return with a brand-new "Swan Lake" or "Giselle," which St. Petersburg is touring with now in old versions. It might be time for them to get face-lifts, too.

REVIEW: 'ROMEO AND JULIET'

## Ballet gives tragic tale a villainess

*Electric choreography, mythology-influenced storytelling striking*

BY MEG FREEMAN WHALEN  
*Special to The Observer*

Shakespeare's in the air this month. The Royal Shakespeare Company is at Davidson, and Monday night, the Carolinas Concert Association presented the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre in "Romeo and Juliet."

With music by Serge Prokofiev, the ballet of the Bard's love story has been imagined by choreographers from Russia to England to the United States. The St. Petersburg Ballet performed a new interpretation by its artistic director, Yuri Petukhov.

The most striking alteration in Petukhov's "Romeo" is the addition of "Queen Mab." Dressed like Catwoman, she is the personification of fate, a perverse fairy who manipulates the characters and the plot. It is Mab who instigates the quarrels and duels, Mab who offers Juliet the sleeping potion, Mab who kills Romeo with a kiss.

The choreography for this

havoc-wreaking force is modern, sexy and athletic and was danced with intensity. But her omnipotence fundamentally changes Shakespeare's work from a human tragedy, in which our failures bring destruction, to a sort of ancient myth, where we are like flies to the gods, and they kill us for sport.

It also introduces a fairy-tale element. When the ballet opens, the lovers, already dead, reside in an expressionist afterworld - all cold lights, dark shadows and billowing fabric - forever united by their love. The show ends the same way, with love eternal and not the horrifying recognition that two families, in hatred, have killed their children.

Whether Petukhov's version sheds new light on an old tale is debatable. But there is no question that his choreography and dancers are excellent. The movement presents an intricate classical language with a modern accent, and was beautifully executed. In addition to the outstanding performance of the lovers, Pavel Vinogradov, as Romeo's friend Mercutio, was especially fine. His death scene and Juliet's solo after Romeo murders Tybalt were electrifying.

# 'Romeo & Juliet': dance at its best

By STEVE FEENEY

There were definitely red eyes in the crowd on the way out of Sunday's ballet performance at Merrill Auditorium. And it wasn't only because of the inordinate amount of stage smoke used in the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre's production of *Romeo & Juliet*.

The performance was genuinely moving and a beautifully executed example of the wonders that can be achieved through an inspired approach to choreography. In this latter category, kudos go to Yuri Petukhov, who also serves as artistic director for the talented troupe.

Petukhov very effectively mixed elements of classic ballet with folk and modern dance styles in this two-act production, which emphasized atmospherics and mood rather than storytelling but most of all provided opportunities for some very good dancing.

The familiar Shakespeare story, set to the alternately lyrical and ominous (recorded) music of Prokofiev, was sketched over 8 scenes. Many of the more striking passages took place behind a transparent screen in a "world of dreams." There, dancers

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### "Romeo & Juliet"

St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre

WHERE: Merrill Auditorium,  
Portland

WHEN: Sunday, March 20

established and elaborated upon the real world action of the ballet. Presiding over this netherworld was Queen Mab, a role danced with serpentine charm by Elena Grineva.

The star-crossed lovers, as an early dream sequence revealed, were doomed from the start. Yet their unfolding story was made poignant by the fine performances of Alexander Akulov and Anna Borodulina. Borodulina particularly enlivened her early coming-of-age scene with her comical Nurse (Ilya Mironov) and seemed to be literally coming apart during a later bit of anguished, twisting movement in reaction to the death of her brother.

Akulov brought to his role of the dashing young blade who falls helplessly in love some nice subtle personal qualities through his interactions with both his mates and foes.

The crowd scenes on the street and later at the ball were very well done, with colorful costuming giving way to period formal attire. Joyous folk passages were placed tellingly at odds with the forcefulness of the male dancers during the relentless Montagues and Capulets theme music.

The staging and lighting for this production were also imaginative. Eight large poles, which lit up at their high end, framed most of the action, while two long swings ultimately became deathbeds for the principals. Various screens, as well as a very large sheet of material that became a billowing cloud, dropped from above. And two large metal wheels became circus-like vehicles while also serving as effective visual metaphors for the inevitable separation of the lovers.

The only quibble, apart from the overused smoke, was the sudden introduction of some hand-held flashing blue lights during the final scene. This seemed just too much of a gimmick in what otherwise had been a very fine afternoon of ballet.

Steve Feeny is a free-lance writer who lives in Portland.

## REVIEW



GEORGE MANISH/THE STAR-LEDGER

Members of the St. Petersburg State Ballet Theatre perform "Capriccio Italien" at the Community Theatre.

## Russia's changing 'Seasons'

St. Petersburg troupe reworks classical ballet repertory

### DANCE

#### St. Petersburg State Ballet Theatre

**Where:** "Romeo and Juliet" at the Stockton Performing Arts Center, Jim Leeds Road, Pomona

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursday

**How much:** \$25 and \$35 (\$23 and \$33 for seniors and \$10 for children). Call (609) 652-9000 or visit [www.stockton.edu/pac](http://www.stockton.edu/pac).

BY ROBERT JOHNSON  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Trumpeting a brand new repertory, the St. Petersburg State Ballet Theatre from Russia arrived in Morristown with a mixed bill of works by the troupe's artistic director, Yuri Petukhov, at the Community Theatre.

While the company's "Russian Seasons" program nominally pays tribute to the Ballets Russes of Serge Diaghilev, only one of the works on this stimulating mixed bill dates from the early 20th century, when Diaghilev's "Russian Seasons" in Paris offered masterpieces by the likes of choreographer Michel Fokine. On Saturday, the St. Petersburg troupe presented Fokine's "Chopiniana," in a redaction by ballet mistress Agrippina Vaganova.

With its carnival theme, Petukhov's "Capriccio Italien" might recall Diaghilev's interest in *commedia dell'arte* — except that its conservative neo-classicism is entirely contemporary.

In his own, "Schéhérazade," Petukhov departs both from Fokine's scenario and his aesthetic in the 1910 original. Yet unlike most attempts to rechoreograph Ballets Russes treasures, this work succeeds on its own terms.

No one can match the sophistication of an authentic Ballets Russes production. Furthermore, Russian choreographers like Petukhov neither understand nor sympathize with the revolutionary goals of Diaghilev's artists. Milking applause with *fouettés* and *grands pirouettes*, as the dancers do in Petukhov's "Schéhérazade," would have disgusted Fokine.

On the other hand, exoticism isn't what it used to be. Ballets that deal with sex and death may still turn heads. But today's audiences would not notice the juxtaposition of blue and green colors that, among other things, made the Ballets Russes' "Schéhérazade" seem so bold in 1910.

Petukhov's approach to "Schéhérazade" derives from his experience in the Maly Theater, dancing for literary-minded choreographer Nikolai Boyarchikov. This "Schéhérazade" has the obligatory writhing arms and torsos in an ambience filled with silken fabric, gold and knives — lots of knives. Yet the famous storyteller of the "1001 Nights" does not ensnare Shah Shahriar in her limbs. Instead, Shahriar becomes entwined in the suspenseful coils of the story she relates. This "Schéhérazade"

is about the ravishing power of narrative.

In contrast to Fokine's verisimilitude, Petukhov's more conceptual staging places Schéhérazade and Shahriar alongside the doomed lovers Nur and Mariam, the principals in Schéhérazade's story. The couples act as foils for each other.

This kind of choreographic parallel seems typical for Petukhov, who likes mirror images and symmetrical reflections. While he varies the designs of his "Capriccio Italien," the movement often seems to unfold from a central point, as in a kaleidoscope. Knees turn in and out. Influenced, from a distance, by Balanchine, "Capriccio Italien" is a plotless work of formal patterns enlivened by speed and by the dancers' dramatic flair. The leading dancer, Maria Yakshanova, paws the ground and stirs restlessly in her partner's embrace, evincing her character's fiery temperament.

St. Petersburg State Ballet Theatre's young performers are beautifully schooled. Especially notable were Nicolai Semenov, Yakshanova's dashing partner in "Capriccio Italien" and Nur in "Schéhérazade," and the gorgeous Julia Prosyannikova, who danced the Prelude in "Chopiniana." Prosyannikova has a wonderfully flexible back, stylish long arms and a magical blend of glamour and mischief. She also possesses the ability to lose herself in the poetry of her role.

DANCE

# Ballet company makes impressive KC debut

By MICKBY COALWELL  
Special to The Star

The St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre, under the auspices of the William Jewell College's Harriman Arts Program, made its Kansas City debut Friday night at the Music Hall. Founded in 1966, the St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre is currently under the artistic direction of Yuri Petukhov.

The program began with Chopiniana, a short, highly stylized ballet, setting the music of Chopin as laborately orchestrated by Alexander Glazunov. Chopiniana was originally choreographed by Michel Fokine, who brought his formidable Russian school of modern ballet to the attention of the rest of the world.

The company displayed impressive classical chops in this ultra-additional ballet, with the evenly divided female corps coyly framing

the pas de deux and pas de trois action center stage. Fokine's original choreography (assuming most of it has survived) depends on strict technical execution, perfect hand and arm placement, and absolute symmetry. It was danced superbly. The company's current director, Yuri Petukhov, choreographed the remaining two pieces on the program: Tchaikovsky's "Capriccio Italien" and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade." Neither was wholly successful, but each had much to admire.

"Capriccio Italien," created in 2003, is reportedly inspired by the "Italianate themes" in Tchaikovsky's bombastic score. Petukhov uses brightly colored costumes of swirling silk and brocade, along with a "masked ball" motif to open the work. Petukhov works his dancers hard, but has the unfortunate tendency to try to capture each rhythmic flourish or orches-

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### St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre

■ Presenter: Harriman Arts Program

■ Reviewed: Feb. 4 at the Music Hall

■ Audience: 1,800 (approx.)

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tral filigree in a corresponding movement. This leads to some occasional sloppy ensemble and just plain "busyness" that detract from the effectiveness of the piece. But this is a minor cavil, because the dancers were so obviously prepared to give their all in making the choreography work. Yuri Andreev, the principal male dancer in this piece, was dynamic.

Petukhov's second contribution to the program was the lovely but

long "Scheherazade," an elaborate story-ballet based on the famous tale of the "Thousand and One Nights." The work simply wore out its welcome, though it had moments of extreme beauty and excitement.

Anastasia Lyubomudrova and Ilya Zabotin danced the roles of Scheherazade and Sultan Shahryar. Costumes tended to be a bit on the tacky side, with lots of gauzy pantaloons, gold lame and bared male chests. The most effective sections were those danced by the two couples alone. The sinuous pseudo-orientalisms of the Petukhov's choreography were nicely attuned to the pseudo-orientalisms in Rimsky's score, and the sheer power and beauty of the dancers was breathtaking. Once again, there was a tendency toward over-literalism, but Petukhov's "Scheherazade" is an impressive achievement.

## Diversions

# 'Giselle' choreography exquisite

By PENELOPE KOSZTOLNYIK  
*Special to the Eagle*

The St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre's *Giselle* opened a two-day run of this ballet for MSC OPAS in Rudder Auditorium at Texas A&M University, and made one wish that OPAS could have scheduled several additional days to present more of artist director Yuri Petukhov's exquisite company's 2005 touring repertoire.

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Petukhov, an honored Russian dancer and choreographer who took the helm of the 1966-founded company in 2001, treats *Giselle* not as a piece to be choreographically updated, but as one of the traditional 19th century treasures to be preserved intact.

Saturday evening's performance was filled with intrinsic beauty and freshness and gave evidence that generations of dancers and audiences will continue to be touched by the genius of *Giselle*'s creators.

Petukhov's dancers, men and women, were uniform in their classical strengths. Principals were marvelous in artistry, skill and character focus. Even unnamed soloists excelled, and the Corps de Ballet was an always-savored contributor of varied moods.

At every moment, the first act's emphasis was upon the age-old story of love and betrayal within the brisk but gently changing tableau of peasant life and the pastoral dalliances of the nobility. Scenery and costumes were so good as to be merely observed as part of the gratifying whole effect, whether in the first act's variety or the menace of the second act's supernatural aura.

Marla Yakshanova made a vibrant and compelling *Giselle*, who gave her death scene a poignant intensity. Her character changes from stern and fleet rejection of Earl Albert's courtship to playful teasing were all the more remarkable for their revelation within subsequent

ly repeated choreographed sequences. Her repeated turns were so light and beautiful that one forgot to count them.

Nicolai Semenov, an attentive partner as Earl Albert, highlighted Yakshanova's extension in her arabesques and made the classical lifts excel in lightness. Tremendous leaps, seemingly without preparation and often bouncing into triple (or more) turns in the air, were plentiful from Semenov as well as Egor Ivanov (Hans), other soloists and corpsmen.

V. Pigicova, as Mirta the Queen of the Willis, seemed to float—so smooth were her small steps in the second act. Truly the women of the Corps de Ballet in this act were an impressive presence, and the menace of Willis' flawless advance in arabesque poses showed their intent and capacity of dancing Hans or Earl Albert to their deaths.

■ Penelope Kosztolnyik reviews classical music for *The Eagle*.