

Bolshoi Stages New Modern Dance Show

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“Reflections” premiered in the United States before it came to Moscow. **Denis Sinyakov**

The modern ballet “Reflections” faces a stern test from Russian audiences — known for their rigid ideas about classical dance — after scoring a victory with critics in the United States.

“Reflections,” which is a joint Russian-American production created by nine choreographers, had its Russian premiere at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater last week.

The performance — which challenges dancers as well as critics — lacks a story line or historical context, leaves freedom of interpretation to its dancers and the audience and wreaks havoc on traditional timing, tutus and style.

All the 11 top dancers taking part in the show graduated from the Moscow State Academy of Choreography, known for its no-nonsense conservative approach.

“I respect art in all forms, and I am so grateful I’ve touched on this type of dance,” said cast member and Bolshoi ballet dancer Natalia Osipova.

Some critics blame Russia — ballet's stern master of heritage — for holding back the evolution of dance by eschewing any form of modern choreography.

The top theaters in Moscow and St. Petersburg have been inviting modern dance companies to stage productions, but much of the Russian public remains hostile to modern dance, considering it “undeserving of Russian talent.”

Little wonder there is no feeling that a change is needed when the list of Russian stars reads like a who's who of ballet over the last 100 years, with names such as Balanchine, Pavlova, Danilova, Nureyev, Baryshnikov and many others.

The creators of “Reflections” see the ballet as a response to the increasing integration of cultures around the world.

“It's not an accident that our project combined choreographers from Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Finland, the U.S., Canada,” creative director Sergei Danilyan said.

But Maria Kochetkova, the principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet who also dances in “Reflections,” worried that the show may meet resistance in Russia.

“In the U.S., this ballet was very well received ... but I think the American audience approves more of modern dance. In Moscow, it will be very different. Our people don't take modern dance as easily,” she said while stretching before a rehearsal at the Bolshoi.

She said she was also initially wary of the modern approach to ballet when she started dancing in San Francisco in 2007 after performing at the Royal Ballet in London.

“But the more I danced in that style, the more I got to understand it and soon, to love it,” she said.

Russian audiences — well-versed in classical ballet — have often viewed it as a downgrade when Russian dancers turn to modern styles of dance.

“It is easy for our dancers to perform this type of dance. They are brought up on the complicated Russian classics,” said 78-year-old enthusiast Magdalena Alexeyevna, who has been closely following ballet for more than 20 years. “Had they brought Western dancers here and asked them to dance our style, they wouldn't be able to.”

The creators of “Reflections” said the Russian public had little choice but to allow for innovation and progress to influence the way ballet is performed these days.

Costume designer Igor Chapurin said even the traditional tutu gets a modern makeover with the introduction of ballet's first leather tutus in “Reflections.”

“We are living in the 21st century, and we are creating with great honor a work for a new generation and a new time.”

“Reflections” will remain in the Bolshoi repertoire for the next three seasons with the current cast.

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