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Finding Common Ground While Dancing

By Katherine Lawrence Mansfield

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Moscow's Center for Contemporary Dance and Performance, TsEKh, has kicked off its annual Festival of Dance Theaters, and audiences once again will be treated to a weeklong kaleidoscope of some of the best contemporary dance, theater and performance on offer.

In a city dominated by the Bolshoi Theater in particular and ballet in general, the Festival, which runs Dec. 1-11, offers a rare opportunity to see a more experimental side of dance.

Now in its 11th year, the Festival has introduced a new concept to the program, which it is calling "2+2" — two countries, two cities. While TsEKh has traditionally focused exclusively on Russian dance companies, this year's Festival will showcase dance from both Russia and Italy. (It is doing so as part of the Year of Russia-Italy).

The Festival will then hold performances in Moscow before hitting the road and traveling to Kostroma, a Volga River city, located about 400 kilometers north of Moscow. This is a bold move: Attracting audiences to contemporary dance can be difficult enough in metropolises such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, but drawing a crowd in a city of just 270,000 is

an ambitious task.

For TsEKh organizers — who make promoting and supporting contemporary performance a priority — expanding beyond the capital made sense. What's more, given the wide selection of performances, the organizers are confident that both the Moscow and Kostroma portions of the Festival will be a success.

In addition to the Italian aspect, this year's program presents the best of avant-garde dance from Poland. Four performances from up-and-coming Polish choreographers, including the Harakiri Farmers, will perform in the first half of the Festival. Foreign companies don't tour frequently in Russia, and so Joanna Lesnierowska, artistic curator for the Polish component, is excited to have the opportunity to perform in Moscow.

As she puts it, "post-Communist countries tend to look West, and we completely ignore what's going on next door."

The Festival's cross-cultural dialogue is, of course, one of the motivations behind the Festival's 2+2 concept. It is a chance for dancers and audience members alike to discover what's new at home and abroad. ⊠⊠

As the artistic director for the Festival makes clear, however, the decision to open up to foreign companies wasn't because of a lack of Russian contemporary dance companies. When it comes to contemporary dance, "I cannot say it's a marginal art in Russia," Yelena Tupyseva said. "After all, we've been putting on a Russia-only festival for nearly 10 years," she noted.

As Tupyseva points out, while it is true that a ballet hegemony is alive and well in this country, a number of non-balletic dance troupes have sprung up over the last two decades.

One such company featured on the program is the highly regarded Provincial Dances from Yekaterinburg. They will perform two works at the festival, and each is bound to be a hit. The first is "The Wedding," a restaging of Stravinsky's 1923 ballet that garnered the company a Golden Mask award in 2000, and the second is "Sepia," a work created last year as part of the American Dance Festival.

Another Russian highlight is Liquid Theatre, a company jointly based out of Moscow, St. Petersburg and Chelyabinsk that are known for their site-specific work. They will present "Subito Forte," a performance that includes live music... and lots of sand!

The Festival opens with "Punto di Fuga," a collaboration between Italian group Zerogrammi and the Kostroma-based Dialog Dance company. This is a humorous dance of minimalist movement and gesture in which four men struggle for power on a stage set like a board game. Having premiered this summer in Turin, the work is an excellent example of the 2+2 concept and the success that can come from collaboration among cultures.

Festival of Dance Theaters TsEKh '11 (Festival Teatrov Tantsa TsEKh '11) runs thru Dec. 11 in the Aktovy Zal/ Zal Olivye at TsEKh, 18 Perevedenovsky Pereulok. Metro Baumanskaya. 221-0757. www.tsekh.ru Also runs at Winzavod, 1 4th Syromyatnicheshky Pereulok, Bldg. 6. Metro Kurskaya, Chkalovskaya. 917-4646. www.winzavod.ru

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