Comedy-oriented Trocks pirouette into SA

Jasmina Wellinghoff, For the Express-News

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Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, a New York-based company of all male ballet dancers, performs Thursday at Lila Cockrell Theater. The troupe emphasizes slapstick in performances.

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An established custom of classical ballet is that men never dance en pointe. But that did not stop 9-year-old Carlos Hopuy from putting on a pair of toe shoes to see if he could pirouette in them.

"My mother was a ballerina in Cuba and she saw me trying to dance en pointe around the house," said Hopuy, a former principal with Ballet San Antonio. "She said, 'If you are going to do that, learn to do it right,' so she taught me the right away to do it."

That early pointe experience came in handy last year when Hopuy left the company to join Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, an all-male company known for its parodies of classical ballet. Affectionately referred to as the Trocks, troupe members have to perform both male and

female roles — they may be the only male dancers around who can rise on their tippy-toes as well as any ballerina.

The New York-based 16-member company will bring its humorous take on ballet to the Lila Cockrell Theater Thursday under the auspices of Arts San Antonio.

Trockadero's artistic director, Tory Dobrin, emphasized that audiences don't need to be familiar with the specific pieces presented to enjoy the performance.

"If you know ballet, you'll have a shock of recognition, and it may be a bit funnier for you. But if you don't, it's just as funny," he said in a phone interview. "We are not catering to ballet-savvy audiences; we are catering to people looking for comedy."

Just the sight of men in tutus elicits giggles. The dancers, who are all ballet pros, further achieve humorous effects through "exaggerating the foibles, accidents and underlying incongruities of serious dance," says the Trockadero's website. Because the company patterns itself after the ornate Russian style, every member has adopted a campy Russian-sounding name, said Dobrin, an admirer of the Russian ballet classics.

Hopuy, for instance, performs as both Alla Snizova and Innokenti Smoktumuchsky. On Thursday, he will portray Kitri, the pretty innkeeper's daughter in the grand pas de deux from "Don Quixote," and also dance in "Walpurgis Night," a piece depicting the spring-welcoming bacchanal from the opera "Faust," originally choreographed by Bolshoi Theater's Leonid Lavrovsky.

Other numbers on the program are "Chopeniana," also known as "Les Sylphides"; and "Go for Barocco," set to Bach's music. In the Trocks' interpretation, the former satirizes the famous original "white ballet," often considered the very epitome of ethereal grace and lyrical dancing. "Barocco" pokes fun at George Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco," another elegant, largely abstract work choreographed to reflect the music.

In "Chopeniana," "our humor is very broad — music hall, slapstick, jokes," said Dobrin, while in "Barocco," Balanchine's motifs "are all mixed up and twisted."

It takes Hopuy about 30 minutes to get ready to step onstage since he — as well as his colleagues — has to apply his own heavy makeup and wigs. When he is finished, he barely recognizes himself: "I go 'Wow, that's me!' I can't believe it."

Both Dobrin and Hopuy pointed out that the Trocks do not pretend to be women, even when they portray female parts.

"We dance as men in drag for comedic effect," Dobrin said.

Hopuy is not the Trocks' only connection to San Antonio. Local teacher and choreographer Susan Trevino set a piece on the ensemble and taught company classes in New York years ago, Dobrin said. She was introduced to the troupe by another San Antonian, the late Michael Gonzales, a dancer and longtime costume designer for the ensemble.

Jasmina Wellinghoff covers dance for the Express-News.