

Review: Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

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By Jasmina Wellinghoff/For the Express-News

Even before the show starts, Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo's audience can get a taste of what's to come by reading the dancers' bios in the program. One such account informs the reader that Ida Nevasayneva, "a socialist and real ballerina of the working peoples everywhere... comes flushed from her triumphs at the Varna Festival where she was awarded a specially created plastic medal for Bad Taste." Another bio states that "the secrets of Mme. Repelskii's beginnings lie shrouded behind the Kremlin wall. In fact, no fewer than six lie in the wall (in jars of assorted sizes.)"

The goofy bios and the fake Russian names are part of the Trocks' act, in keeping with the group's predilection for parodying the ornate Russian/ Soviet classical style admired by Artistic Director Tory Dobrin, himself of Russian descent. For the Trocks, loving ballet means having the freedom to poke fun at it and that's exactly what they've been doing since 1974 when the company was founded in New York City. Yes, in New York. The "Monte Carlo" reference is just a way to poke fun at themselves, too.

The all-male, 16-member ensemble brought its entertaining take on ballet to the Lila Cockrell Theater last night (April 11) under the auspices of Arts San Antonio. The audience loved them.

Though they dance both male and female roles, the "females" predominate and that's what makes the Trocks funny right from the start. In an interview, Dobrin insisted that his dancers don't try to emulate women but dance "as men in drag for comic effect." OK, but Thursday night they sometimes came awfully close to dancing like women, not only because they performed en pointe but also because they so competently, and even gracefully, reproduced the choreography of undulating arms, fouetté turns or dainty bourée steps – and all the rest – that ballerinas usually charm us with.

Most of what they performed was listed in the program but the company likes to leave room for surprises. The best was their signature piece "The Dying Swan," which appeared to be patterned after the legendary version of the great Maya Plisetskaya, easily the most famous Russian ballerina of the 20th century. Danced by Marina Plezegetovstageskaya (Roberto Forleo), the solo provoked instant laughter as the Swan started shedding its feathers the moment it stepped on stage, then haplessly tried to recover some from the floor. And though spiced with humorous moves – including urging the audience to clap by suggestively fluttering its dying hands – Forleo's interpretation was also an endearing tribute to this iconic role of the classical repertoire.

The show opened with “Chopeniana,” also known as “Les Sylphides,” which in its original is a semi-abstract, so-called “white ballet” that’s all about romantic lyricism and porcelain-like ballerinas. Possibly the funniest part was the sole danseur, usually referred to as the Poet (Giovanni Ravelo, a.k.a. Marat Legupski) who parodied the romantic hero by appearing to be lost in his own reverie, with his eyes mostly fixed on some distant vision while his partner (Plezegetovstageskaya) had to remind him of her presence. Other funny business consisted of little pranks sprinkled throughout, like a ballerina lifting her leg in arabesque and kicking another one, pratfalls, corps members lagging behind or losing their place and other antics.

After intermission, Alla Snizova (former Ballet San Antonio member Carlos Hopuy) razzle-dazzled the audience with partner Andrei Leftov (Boysie Dikobe) in the pas de deux from “Don Quixote,” which was followed by Peter Anastos’ send-up of George Balanchine’s “Concerto Barocco,” renamed “Go for Barocco.” Perhaps due to skimpier costumes, the guys definitely looked like guys in this one, their muscular legs and shoulders a far cry from what the famous Mr. B expected from his ballerinas. The piece is probably best appreciated by people familiar with the original.

The concert closed with the colorful romp “Walpurgis Night” staged by Elena Kunikova after Leonid Lavrovsky, who originally choreographed it for the Bolshoi Ballet. (By the way, Kunikova created several short children’s ballets a couple of years ago for Musical Bridges Around the World.) There was a great deal of straight dancing here as in a longish segment featuring three Nymphs in pastel dresses with gauzy scarves, but the laughs were never far away. Hopuy dazzled again (although his name was not in the program) as the light-on-his-feet, bouncy god Pan hanging out with his Fauns, while Viacheslav Legupski (Paolo Cervellera) and Olga Supphozova (the robust Robert Carter) dallied as Bacchus and his Bacchante. Carter gets lifted a lot and whipped around by Cervellera which, given his size, is pretty hilarious. The interaction with the rather small Hopuy has its amusing moments as well.

For a quick encore, the company launched into a swiny blitz that probably sent everyone out into the breezy night feeling like dancing.

Jasmina Wellinghoff covers dance for the Express-News.