

## Tchaikovsky sets the tone for 'Romeo and Juliet'

Jasmina Wellinghoff, For the Express-News

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*Real-life husband and wife Yevgeni Anfinogenov and Olga Pavlova will dance the title roles in the Mejia Ballet International performance of "Romeo and Juliet."*

Fort Worth choreographer Paul Mejia was so taken by Tchaikovsky's three fantasy overtures based on Shakespeare's plays that he decided to create ballets based on all three.

His first, "Romeo and Juliet," premiered in 1977 and has since been revived many times by different companies.

"It has always been a great vehicle for beautiful ballerinas, and it was danced by some of the best, like Suzanne Farrell, Lucia Lacarra and Maria Terezia Balogh, and another incredible ballerina, Olga Pavlova, is dancing it now," Mejia said in telephone interview.

Mejia Ballet International will perform "Romeo and Juliet" and three other works Wednesday at Majestic Theatre under the auspices of Arts San Antonio.

Though "Romeo and Juliet" is often presented as a full-length ballet, usually set to music by Prokofiev, Mejia felt that Tchaikovsky's 30-minute overture embodies the essence of the play.

In this version, the story is seen “through Juliet's eyes.” It starts with a scene in Juliet's tomb, where a grief-stricken Romeo concludes that his beloved is dead and decides to poison himself. After Juliet awakes and finds him dead, the scenario develops as a stream of her reminiscences, from meeting Romeo at a ball to all the key moments of the tale, until it circles back to the tomb.

“Everything is in the music — themes of love, turmoil, dark tombl-like passages; that's what intrigued me about this score. It really tells the whole story,” Mejia said. “But Tchaikovsky did not end it on a down note. There is an apotheosis at the end, which symbolically says that Romeo and Juliet continue to live forever in everybody's mind as true, innocent lovers. Love prevailed.”

Pavlova's Romeo will be her real-life husband, Yevgeni Anfinogenov, while Tybalt will be danced by another Russian, Andrey Prikhodko. All three — and Prikhodko's wife, ballerina Marina Goshko — are now residents of the Dallas Metroplex area.

A large corps de ballet consisting of 12 company members and 14 pre-professional dancers from the San Antonio Metropolitan Ballet will act as a Greek chorus throughout, said Mejia, creating the context for each scene.

Other works on the program are “Jeux” (“Games”) set to the eponymous composition by Claude Debussy; “Café Victoria,” a balletic take on Piazzola's tango “Contrabajissimo”; and “Serenade in A,” which Mejia described as a largely abstract and challenging piece for four ballerinas.

“Jeux” was commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev's Les Ballets Russes in 1913 for a ballet choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky.

“It's about tennis,” Mejia said, “and we have tennis rackets and tennis balls on stage. It's a neat piece.”

It will be danced Wednesday by Goshko, Prikhodko and Sarah Marr, all principal dancers.

Mejia's work has been praised by critics throughout his long career, which started at the New York City Ballet, where he danced many leading roles in Balanchine's ballets and married Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's favorite ballerina at the time. (They divorced in 1998.)

A prolific choreographer, he became the artistic co-director of the Chicago City Ballet in 1980 and later moved to the Dallas area to lead the Fort Worth Dallas Ballet (now Texas Ballet Theater) and then the Metropolitan Classical Ballet in Arlington, which no longer exists. He is now an independent producer.

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram reviewer said that “Romeo and Juliet” “may be Mejia's masterpiece,” while the Dallas Morning News described it as “poetic as well as dramatic.”