

Duato's St. Petersburg Dilemma

At this very moment choreographer Nacho Duato is experiencing the toughest time of his career. The question that comes up more and more often in ballet fans' discussions regarding Duato's acceptance of the artistic director position at the Mikhailovsky Ballet Company is whether this is a new turn in the great Spaniard's career or its swan song, its downfall?

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Those who are sure of Duato's talent expect him to become the Marius Petipa of the 21st century and hope that he will transform the classical ballet and the attitude toward dance not only within the walls of the Mikhailovsky Theatre but in all of St. Petersburg. Duato, who worked his way up honestly from a dancer in the Cullberg Ballet company and the Netherlands Dance Theatre under Jiří Kylián to the world's leading choreographer and artistic director of the Royal Theatre of Madrid, is expected to accomplish an impressive program that he announced upon his accession to the post. The program was to include both Duato and his students teaching at the Vaganova Academy, a new international festival of contemporary ballet, and a series of unexpected, daring and successful new productions.

There has been no more talk about the festival or the work at the Vaganova for over a year now. Yet the shadow of Petipa won't leave Duato's admirers alone. In the cradle of Russian ballet, this belief in a foreigner-choreographer is so great that Duato is becoming a prisoner of other people's stereotypes. The appointment to the post of artistic director of a rich local ballet theatre such as the Mikhailovsky, with its impressive list of sponsors and Vladimir Kekhman, "the banana oligarch", as its general director, is a challenge that is alluring as much as it is complicated. In Russia it is very difficult to not allow yourself to be run by money and a general, viscous artistic inertia. And if one is to assume the role of "Petipa, the Reformer", one should work first and foremost on the perceptions of the sponsors and the company entrusted to one's leadership.

And Nacho Duato was victorious with his self-choreographed one-act ballets "Nunc Dimittis", "Prelude", "Without Words", and "Duende". His well-honed, cool

and refined neoclassicism, his impeccable choice of musical material (Arvo Pärt, Handel, Beethoven, Schubert, Britten, Debussy), his smart and personal interpretation of the composers' ideas, his love of ballet shoes and black and white geometry in choreography and set design have quickly proven to the residents of St. Petersburg that Duato is one of their own, and that he's new and that he has something to offer to the city that has seen a lot of great and interesting dances. Duato has once again shown himself a master of thirty-minute-long one-act ballets. His ability to drop the curtain a minute before you begin to feel boredom coming on is truly rare and valuable.

"Russian audience is famous for its highly intellectual level of perception, and if they see a good production, be it classical or contemporary, they react appropriately," says Nacho Duato. "I think that we actually underestimate the audience. We think that spectators are these inflexible conservatives, who only wish to see something predictable. I have no plans to break something down completely; I simply want to add something new. The traditions will remain: I do not plan on cutting down the repertoire; I just want to water that little flower so it has a chance to live. I believe that changes that force you to give up something are bad, while changes that make you take a step forward are beneficial."

His experiment with "The Sleeping Beauty", however, didn't work out so well. Duato wanted to stage a small ballet, but the power of money, reinforced by the ambitions of the keepers of classical ballet, forced the choreographer to tackle this work that is sacred for the Russian ballet stage. Initially, Duato did not intend to stray far from Petipa's choreography. He merely wished to freshen it up a bit. In the end, however, he made the decision to create an original choreographic version, filled with timid references to the earlier productions. The task of a contemporary choreographer -- to express a dancer through the artist's gesture -- did not trump the task of a classics interpreter, burdened by all-round responsibility. Duato is a brilliant classic in the field of dance experiment; he knows and loves classical ballet and its vocabulary. That is why Mats Ek's approach with his unexpected version of "The Sleeping Beauty" was foreign to Duato; and he didn't have time to compose his own personal choreographic text for the three-act ballet. The costumes and set designs by Angelina Atlagić, a Balkan artist, discovered for Russia by director Ivan Popovski, became the production's biggest strengths. As a designer's project "The Sleeping Beauty" was a success -- the fusion of costume colors with stage lighting, set designs and the color scheme of the auditorium. iPhones were taking pictures without the flash --

glamorous beauties discarded their fashion magazines and were capturing Atlagić's fashionable solution and ballerinas' poses. Svetlana Zakharova (she took turns dancing with Irina Perren, another ballerina of the Mikhailovsky Theatre) was Aurora, flawless as always in her lines (she danced this part at the Bolshoi Theatre as well in Yuri Grigorovich's production) and intoxicated by her own presence on the stage. Leonid Sarafanov as Prince Džsirj was allowed to be near the star, even though he is a star in his own right and deserves to shine brighter... The Wicked Fairy Carabosse, played by Rishat Yulbarisov, drew the loudest applause -- his artistry and expressive plasticity that never crossed into the overly sharp grotesque filled the colorfully staged production with drama, conflict of plot and theatrical suspense.

The experience of interpreting a ballet classic in front of the St. Petersburg audience was inevitable and educational. The responsibilities of an artistic director, after all, are different from those of a guest choreographer, and Duato shined in the latter role even before St. Petersburg in his productions in Moscow. The Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Music Theatre was the first in Russia to receive Duato's productions in its repertoire. The theatre's management skillfully employed Duato's choreographic talent, which does a magnificent job stylizing folklore within the framework of neoclassical ballet forms. His short ballet "Na Floresta" with the hot, humid and elusive eroticism of the Amazon selva forests set to the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos became a success. The ballet "Por Vos Muero" set to Spanish music of the 15th-16th century was another indisputable triumph. Staging dances, contemporary and authentic simultaneously to the music of the pre-notational period (the first textbook of dance notation in European culture was proposed by Raoul Auger-Feuillet in 1700) is still an extremely difficult task even for a talented and well-educated man. Yet the love of one's national culture works miracles -- the resulting ballet was elegant, tragic (with Garcilaso de la Vega's poem about unrequited love) and conveyed the choreographer's enthusiastic humility with regard to the time when Spain was a powerful nation that greatly impacted the fates of other countries.

When it came to programs of the Chekhov International Theatre Festival, which began introducing Russian ballet lovers to productions of the National Ballet of Spain, Nacho Duato always appeared as a refined esthete, who knew how to talk to the audience. His ballet "Gnawa" demonstrated an extremely topical, spectacular interpretation of the Gnawa traditions - the primary school of folklore music in Morocco, which emerged from the intertwining of Spanish and North

African musical traditions that facilitated the process of falling into a religious trance. The ballet "Arcangelo" set to the music of Arcangelo Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti is a gift of a philosopher, who muses paradoxically about heaven and hell and the quest for freedom through death, who can express his thoughts in a sketch of humble and precise movements. The talent of Duato, the choreographer puts his concepts and ideas into practice; the talent of Duato, the enlightener carries those concepts to the audience. Nikolai Tsiskaridze, who hosts ballet programs on the Kultura Channel and is seriously considering collaboration with the Natalya Sats Musical Theatre, is probably the only one in the field of Russian ballet who can boast a successful enlightening role. Duato's task is similar but also more complicated in some respect: to replant the European mentality and the European somatic code into the Russian soil.

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